

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 15 April 2013
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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 15 April 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Crossmaglen Jobs and Benefits Office

Mr Speaker: Ms Megan Fearon has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. During the past two weeks, my colleagues Mickey Brady and Councillor Terry Hearty and I have received a petition signed by the concerned residents of south Armagh about the closure of the jobs and benefits office in Crossmaglen. I want to present the petition to the Minister today to demonstrate the need to retain that vital service in the area. The petition clearly shows the depth of feeling among the local people who use and value that essential service.

Crossmaglen is one of the most deprived rural wards in the North. That, coupled with the fact that there is a high level of disability among the population, means that any reduction in services is keenly felt. The Minister may not be aware of this, but the cost of a return bus ticket from Crossmaglen to Newry is in excess of £7. That places a severe financial burden on someone who must survive on benefits and is, therefore, wholly unfair. Buses are also few and far between, meaning that people who rely on public transport spend hours and hours waiting. There was a recent example of the flaws in the system when a local man's bus was delayed and he was five minutes late to his tribunal in Newry. By the time he got there, the tribunal had happened in his absence.

My constituency office in Crossmaglen has received complaints about the new Customer First helpline that is designed to replace the permanent office. It has been hailed as a complete disaster. One individual had to hold on the line for 34 minutes, while another elderly man hung up after 30 minutes of talking to what he described as a machine. These people are

entitled to their benefits, so they should not be degraded in this manner and forced to fight for what they are entitled to.

Questions also need to be answered about the fact that local community and voluntary groups will inevitably take on the excess work — an added burden on their already strained resources. Will they be subsidised for that? The Department's priority appears to be wholly centred on saving money rather than providing vital and necessary services to our constituents. There is always talk about improving rural services, but this is certainly no improvement. It will be a huge loss to our local community. I call on the Minister to stop the closure of the Crossmaglen jobs and benefits office.

Ms Fearon moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward a copy to the Minister for Social Development and send a copy to the Chair of the Committee, Mr Alex Maskey.

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I respect the right of the Member to present the petition on behalf of the residents of Crossmaglen, but it is important for the record to show that, although the item of business refers to the closure of the jobs and benefits office in Crossmaglen, there is not a jobs and benefits office in Crossmaglen, never mind one that is closing. If there was one, it would be an issue for both my Department and my colleague Mr McCausland's. I think that the Department for Social Development runs a community-based centre in Crossmaglen, but it is not a jobs and benefits office. In that respect, the wording of the petition and the Order Paper do not reflect the realities of the situation that we are talking about. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* Order. Let me deal with this point of order, first. *[Interruption.]* Order. The Minister has put it on the record. Let me say, as Speaker, that I am very reluctant to get involved in public petitions,

unless it is on a more serious matter than the one about which the Minister has spoken. However, the Minister has put the issue clearly on the record to correct it.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We met the chief executive of the Social Security Agency about the matter, and he did not, at any time, tell us that there was not a jobs and benefits office in Crossmaglen. It is a community office; there are three of them. There may have been some confusion around that, but there is an office in Crossmaglen that is closing. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have points of order ending up as statements from Members. Order. Let us move on.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I just want to bring some light to the whole thing. We have listened to the Member supporting the petition and the Minister: is this a valid petition, or should it now be handed back and the Member told to try again?

Mr Speaker: This is very much a valid petition that has been presented to the Assembly. Let us move on.

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 15 April 2013.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 15 April 2013.

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

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Jimmy Spratt replace Mr Paul Givan as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; and that Ms Paula Bradley replace Mr Jonathan Craig as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr Weir.]

Mr Speaker: We now move to the second motion on Committee membership. Again, this will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Ian Milne be appointed as a member of the Committee for the Environment; that Mr Chris Hazzard replace Mr Mitchel McLaughlin as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; that Mr Declan McAleer be appointed as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges; and that Mr Ian Milne replace Mr Chris Hazzard as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. — [Ms Ruane.]

Election of Deputy Speaker

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that, as Standing Order 5 requires that there should be three Deputy Speakers, a vacancy exists following the resignation of Mr Francie Molloy. The next item of business is the election of a Deputy Speaker to fill that vacancy, which will be conducted under the process set out in Standing Order 4.

I will begin by calling for nominations. Any Member may rise to propose a candidate for Deputy Speaker. Only a name should be proposed at that point. I will then return to the Member to speak in more detail in the debate. Once again, I say to whoever is nominating a Member to be a Deputy Speaker that, at this moment, we require only the nomination. I will return to the Members who are nominating to say a few words and speak in more detail. I will then ask for the proposal to be seconded, as required under Standing Order 14, and ask whether the Member nominated and seconded is willing to accept the nomination. I will then call for any further proposals and follow the same procedure for each. When it appears that there are no further proposals, I will make it clear that the time for proposals has passed. If Members indicate that they wish to speak, a debate relevant to the election may then take place. When Members rise in their place, they must speak on the nominee.

At the conclusion of the debate or the conclusion of the nominations if there are no requests to speak, I shall put the Question that the Member first proposed shall be Deputy Speaker of the Assembly. The vote will be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I shall put the Question on the next nominee and so on, until all nominations are exhausted. Once a Deputy Speaker is elected, all other nominations will fall automatically. Let us proceed to the election of a Deputy Speaker.

Do I have any proposals for the office of Deputy Speaker of the Assembly? Members should rise in their place.

Mr M McGuinness: I propose that Mitchel McLaughlin be elected as Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is there a seconder for Mr McLaughlin?

Ms Ruane: I second the proposal. Tugaim tacaíocht don rún. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Mr McLaughlin, do you accept the nomination as Deputy Speaker of the Assembly?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: With some relief, I accept. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Do we have any further proposals?

Mr McCallister: I propose the name of Basil McCrea.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a seconder?

Mr Allister: I second that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Are there any further proposals? Mr McCrea, do you accept the nomination?

Mr B McCrea: I accept the nomination.

Mr Speaker: Are there any further proposals?

There are no further proposals. At this point, as I indicated, Members who wish to speak can do so. I remind Members to keep their comments brief and to the point and not to be tempted to stray into any other areas. The time for proposals has expired. I call — who do we have first? Martin McGuinness. Sorry.

Mr M McGuinness: It is a great pleasure and honour to propose my friend Mitchel McLaughlin as the Deputy Speaker. I place on record our thanks to Francie Molloy, who has left the Assembly for another place, for the very positive and constructive contribution that he made in — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr M McGuinness: — supporting the Speaker throughout his term as Deputy Speaker.

The north-west has a proud record of supporting and providing Speakers for the Assembly, not least, Mr Speaker, your contribution over a number of years, which has rightly been applauded by society and by everybody in the House, someone who has been very fair, has ensured the speaking rights of everyone in the House and has conducted the affairs of the House in a way that makes us all proud of that contribution. I believe that Mitchel McLaughlin will continue in that vein. He has vast experience of the workings of the House and will make his own unique contribution towards supporting the work of the

Chair. There will be further discussions on other positions today, but, for this period and this debate, suffice it to say that Mitchel McLaughlin is eminently qualified to be a Deputy Speaker of the House.

12.15 pm

Mr P Robinson: I think that everyone knows that it is essential to the operation of the institutions that there is appropriate cross-community balance in various positions. This position was held by a Sinn Féin Member; therefore, I think that it is assumed that a Sinn Féin Member would automatically replace him. However, it would be irresponsible of us if we did not provide the likely candidate with the opportunity to indicate his position on some key issues.

I would not have raised this matter had it not been for certain responses to a 'Belfast Telegraph' poll of the activists — the members — who were present at Sinn Féin's weekend conference. That put some doubt on where a large section of the Sinn Féin membership stands on the role of dissidents and their activity; support for policing and giving information to the police; support for prosecutions against those found guilty of various activities; and, of course, support for the rule of law and opposition to an armed campaign.

I know from having been Finance Minister when Mr McLaughlin was the Chairman of the Committee what, I believe, his responses will be to these matters. However, it is important that he shows that he supports the position that the deputy First Minister has taken on those issues, which is contrary to some of the positions that have been adopted by the active membership of his party.

Mr Dickson: The Alliance Party is content with the nomination of Mr McLaughlin for Deputy Speaker. I would like to place on record our thanks to Mr Molloy, who did an excellent job as Principal Deputy Speaker. As others have said, he treated all Members fairly and equally, as indeed you do daily, Mr Speaker.

Mr Allister: The House likes to publicly portray itself as a beacon of inclusivity. It likes to present itself across the world as representative of such inclusivity. Some of us, of course, have come to experience that the inclusivity is only for those who are inside the Executive tent. Therefore, the filling of the position of Deputy Speaker is an opportunity for the House to disprove that perception and to prove that it

genuinely believes in inclusivity by appointing a Deputy Speaker from outside the parties that are represented in the Executive. Therein, of course, lies the nomination of Mr Basil McCrea. It will be a test for all in the House of whether they prefer Mr Mitchel McLaughlin of Sinn Féin and that cosy interparty, intra-Executive relationship or are prepared to afford some inclusivity to those outside the Executive parties and support the nomination of the sole candidate from that position. That is the challenge of this nomination. For that reason, I support Mr McCrea's nomination.

Mrs Foster: I support my party leader, the First Minister, on the questions that he posed. We very much hope that the nominee, Mr McLaughlin, will take the opportunity to clarify the position that he intends to hold: whether he supports the deputy First Minister in the view that dissident terrorists are traitors or agrees with those who were surveyed at the party conference at the weekend, only 12% of whom supported the deputy First Minister's position on dissident terrorists. In fact, of those surveyed, only 34% saw dissident republicans as criminals, and only 36% said that the Police Service of Northern Ireland was an impartial service or force. Therefore, you can see that we have grave concerns arising from the weekend poll, and we want to give Mr McLaughlin the opportunity to clarify his position on those matters. We feel that support for the rule of law and for the institutions of this place are fundamental issues. Indeed, he would just be repeating the oath that Ministers take in relation to their support for the rule of law —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mrs Foster: — police, the courts and justice, and we expect that he should make that clear.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle, for the opportunity to speak. First, I welcome the nomination to the post of my party colleague Mitchel McLaughlin. I am disappointed that the First Minister has taken the opportunity to respond to what I have to say is a somewhat dubious poll on the front page of the 'Belfast Telegraph'. I am sure that he has experience from his own party conferences of how such polls are conducted.

Mr P Robinson: We have 100% support.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, and I assure the Member that the most important poll that was taken over the weekend — I think that there were 206-odd polls — was when our party membership went

into the voting hall and voted for the leadership of Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams. Their leadership has been very clear on where this party stands on the use of violence for political purposes. We have stood to the forefront, and, in fact, we have gone toe to toe with these so-called dissident republican organisations. Indeed, the life of many of my party's members has been placed in danger because we have taken that position. Only recently, Martin McGuinness's life has been under threat because of our position.

We should not allow the political agenda or the political atmosphere of this Chamber or our society to be set by dubious polls that are taken of 50 out of 2,000 delegates who gathered in Castlebar, County Mayo, over the weekend. Sinn Féin does not have to prove itself to anyone in these matters. We have proved our worth to the people who count most: the electorate. The electorate trusts us in these matters, and Members across the Chamber should trust on our actions, deeds and words. They should not rely on fanciful headlines from any media outlet to judge us on where we stand on these matters; they should judge us on what we have done. The most important people who will judge this party — the only people who will judge it — are the electorate.

Mr McCallister: I support my nominee, Basil McCrea. There are several things that, I think, are important. It is important that the Assembly recognises that there is starting to grow on these Benches an opposition that sits outside the Executive and wants to challenge the Executive — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr McCallister: — and that wants to see the numbers on these Benches grow. More importantly, that opposition needs and should have a voice and representation on the Business Committee, as well as in the form of a Deputy Speaker, so that it can not only speak up for the independence of every Member but represent the independence of the Chamber from the Executive. They are two separate branches of our government and should be treated as such, so we should have the checks and balances to represent that.

I know that DUP Members support the argument on opposition. They also say that they support moving away from things such as community designation. Community balance was the very first issue that the First Minister

mentioned. My colleague, Mr McCrea, has amply demonstrated — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCallister: — over his time in the Assembly that he will represent everyone in it as Deputy Speaker without fear or favour. That is the calibre of individual that we want to elect to the office.

The First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment raised concerns about the Sinn Féin ard fheis at the weekend. They have no such concerns with Basil McCrea. They can quite easily — *[Interruption.]* It is strange that they did not mention any concerns about Basil McCrea when they had two Members willing to speak. Now will be the test for them as we go to the vote: will they support a candidate they have no concerns about over one they do have concerns about? Will they support a candidate who will stand up for the independence of the Chamber from the Executive? *[Interruption.]* They will have the chance to do that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to finish.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I would happily give way if I had more time. The Member can easily take part in the debate. Why does he not speak to the Clerks at Table and take part in the debate, and then he can say whatever he likes? If he is concerned, let him get up and say so. Otherwise, he will have the opportunity in a few minutes to vote. Will he vote for a candidate he does not have concerns about who will represent the Assembly and its independence — *[Interruption.]* I would be surprised if he has more concerns about Basil McCrea than about Mitchel McLaughlin. That really will say something about where Mr Storey is moving to.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to say a few words. I am sure that Mr McLaughlin will take a similar opportunity to respond to the questions that were put from the Benches opposite. The House should recognise that there are people who are not part of the Executive but want to make a contribution and will attempt to chair debates, as others have, in a fair and impartial way. Those of you who have sat with me on Committees — there have been many from different parties — will, I think, accept that I am fair and impartial in the way that I chair debates.

It is important that we put that challenge to people.

There are some questions being put to other people, but I will answer them on my behalf. First, I am absolutely and totally committed to the rule of law. There is no question whatsoever about my support for what is right in this society or for trying to move things forward. We have an opportunity in the House to show a certain amount of leadership. If there are genuine concerns and the First Minister, in voicing those concerns, wants an answer, no doubt people will take the opportunity to answer him and, indeed, Mrs Foster. If any Members want to make an intervention, I will clarify my position, but make no mistake: the questions that you put to the other candidate will not apply to me.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: Mr Speaker, is it in order for me to take an intervention?

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that, we assume, he is probably going to have some difficult and onerous tasks ahead of him as the "leader" of the party that he has been trying to form for the past two months, will he have time for the job of Deputy Speaker?

Mr B McCrea: It is very interesting to hear from an MP — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I will put a question directly to Members opposite, because I do not have time to engage in a debate. You have concerns. You have an opportunity to vote for somebody other than the candidate who you have concerns about. We will watch and listen to what you have to say, but the decision is yours.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. While I am honoured to have been nominated for the position, I am somewhat disappointed that the First Minister took the particular line that he did. I have been a Member of the Assembly since it was established. I was part of the negotiations that brought it about and brought about the new beginning to policing and the establishment of a new justice system. I see all of that as part of my personal legacy, and I stand 100% behind it. It was one of the proudest experiences of my life.

However, I am disappointed. I have had the opportunity, given my long involvement in this Assembly, to work with people across the political spectrum. I think that I have demonstrated to any fair-minded person that I can discharge my duties, and I do it fearlessly.

12.30 pm

My experience of standing up to dissidents and those who would challenge the rule of law has been that my home has been petrol bombed. My home was attacked within the past fortnight. That does not deter me. I will continue to do that, but I will continue also to work with others to map out a better way forward for our entire society.

Every comment that the deputy First Minister has made, from the earliest days of this peace process right through to this weekend, when he addressed our party conference, I stand 100% behind.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: No, thank you; I could probably write the script.

Question put, That Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, being the first candidate proposed, be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 80; Noes 15.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow,

Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

OTHER:

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Fearon and Mr McMullan.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

OTHER:

Mr Agnew.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Allister and Mr McCallister.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>95</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>80</i>	<i>[84.2%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>38</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>[71.4%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>[87.5%]</i>

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, being the first candidate proposed, be Deputy Speaker of this Assembly.

Mr Speaker: I declare that Mr Mitchel McLaughlin has been elected as Deputy Speaker. I offer him my hearty congratulations and look forward to working with him.

Principal Deputy Speaker

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is the nomination of a Deputy Speaker to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. The process will be conducted in accordance with Standing Order 5A. I will begin by asking for a nomination. Any Member may rise to nominate one of the Deputy Speakers to act as Principal Deputy Speaker. Only a name should be proposed at this point. I will return to the Member to speak in more detail in the debate. When I have confirmed that the person nominated is willing

to act as Principal Deputy Speaker, a debate relevant to the nomination will take place.

The Business Committee has agreed that only one Member will speak on behalf of each party in the debate, at the end of which I will put the Question on the nomination. The vote will once again be on a cross-community basis. If the proposal is not carried, I will ask for further nominations and proceed as I normally would.

Do I have a proposal for a Deputy Speaker to be nominated to act as Principal Deputy Speaker?

Mr M McGuinness: I nominate Deputy Speaker Mitchel McLaughlin to act as Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Mr McLaughlin, do you agree to act as Principal Deputy Speaker?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I agree to act as Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Standing Orders provide for a debate to take place on the nomination. Members may speak only once in the debate. Standing Order 5A(7) requires the debate to be relevant to the nomination. I will not allow Members to stray into any area other than the one that is being debated on the Floor.

Mr M McGuinness: I am honoured to nominate Deputy Speaker Mitchel McLaughlin to be Principal Deputy Speaker. That follows on from the hugely positive and constructive work done by Francie Molloy as Principal Deputy Speaker, who worked constructively with you and your office to ensure that the work of the House would continue.

It has been disappointing today to hear some of the views expressed on the other side of the House, and there is a temptation to respond to that, but I will not do that; I will rise above it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: It is hugely important that we recognise that the party that I represent has been at the forefront of supporting not just law and order but the police. We have been at the forefront, even with the risk to the lives of some of our members, of standing against the activities of so-called dissident republicans. We have been very strong advocates that people who break the law should be made amenable before the courts and that society as a whole has a duty and responsibility to provide

whatever information is required to ensure that people who break the law and threaten the lives of our citizens are brought before the courts. We have been involved in a huge amount of work on the courts through the review of the criminal justice system, and the changes made have been to the benefit of everybody. I am very proud of the part that my party played in all that. Our qualifications as a party that supports law and order, the courts and the police are absolutely beyond question.

Other parties have had party conferences, and they have had journalists of all descriptions swarming through the masses. I do not even know who these people spoke to. I do not even know whether they were members of Sinn Féin or members of the public there as spectators of the ard fheis. One thing that is crystal clear is that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: — my party stands four-square behind the peace process, the PSNI and the gardaí, who have done a remarkable job over the past 18 months in thwarting the activities of those who would attempt to plunge us back into the past. They have done that in the context of ensuring no loss of life. Anybody attempting to cast aspersions on our commitment to the peace process needs to get real, and what we saw earlier was a bit of a charade.

Mr P Ramsey: First, on behalf of the SDLP, I warmly congratulate Mitchel McLaughlin on becoming Deputy Speaker. Personally, as a former neighbour, I wish you well in your new position. Maybe that is as far as it goes.

There has never been a justifiable reason given or compelling case made for the appointment of a Principal Deputy Speaker. The SDLP believes that it is a carve-up between the two main parties that was done without consultation and without using the normal practices of the House to try to achieve a consensus.

During the previous debate in this Chamber, I said — I will repeat myself — that there is no good reason why we should create a hierarchy of Speakers and an extra layer of bureaucracy. The British and Irish Parliaments do not have Principal Deputy Speakers, and there is no reason for this House to seek such a new system.

Over the weekend, I listened to the deputy First Minister talk about the importance of equality and parity of esteem, yet Sinn Féin made a deal

with the DUP without giving any consideration to the notion of equality. His words ring hollow in the House today. If this is his Ireland of equals, I am afraid that it is back to the drawing board.

May I pose a question that has been previously asked? As a result of the change, has the House been better managed? Has the Chamber become more effective and more efficient? I do not think so. Indeed, I believe that the change has done quite the opposite: it has created a feeling among Members that the very institutions that we work in are subject to change on the whim of Sinn Féin and the DUP. The people outside these walls are not blind to that.

We have yet to get answers to the questions that I raised about the management, effectiveness and efficiency of the House. Many will deduce that this is a two-party carve up with the mantra that all Deputy Speakers are equal but some are more equal than others. For those reasons, the SDLP will not be in a position to support the nomination of Mitchel McLaughlin as Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, let me first dismiss the apologia that you just listened to from the SDLP, which still has not come to terms with the electoral facts that it is now a small party that is no longer able to lead and which cannot come to terms with the fact that, if you are looking for two people who will be Speaker and Deputy Speaker, you will naturally look to the larger parties in the Assembly.

Arising out of the previous debate, I will address the remarks made by Mr McCallister, who does not seem to have come to terms with the fact that, at Westminster, it is from within the Government party that the Speaker came on the previous occasion. There is nothing unusual about a Speaker coming from a government party.

Mr McCallister: Will the First Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: Am I permitted to give way, Mr Speaker? I will happily do so if I can.

Mr Speaker: Yes, the Member has the Floor.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the First Minister. Will he not admit to the fact that, when Mr Bercow was first elected Speaker, Labour was in power? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not get into a debate on an election somewhere else. *[Interruption.]* Order.

Mr P Robinson: A quick turning-up of the facts will show that the Conservative Party was in government at the beginning of this session, when the election of the Speaker took place. So, there is nothing inconsistent with it at all.

I will also respond to the other issues. At the beginning of the previous debate, I made it clear that we have established a principle of cross-community sharing of top positions, which, naturally, would have fitted Sinn Féin into the position that we are now talking about. That is accepted. However, we did not raise any issues. Sinn Féin members raised them when they were talking to whoever was acting for the 'Belfast Telegraph' poll. I am sure that they are not indicating that the 'Belfast Telegraph' was acting dishonestly with the figures that it produced. If they are not suggesting that the 'Belfast Telegraph' acted dishonestly, we have to accept that, among the activists who were present at their conference, — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr P Robinson: — a significant number, which, in some cases was the largest number of those who were questioned, had a view either about dissident activity, support for the police and passing information to the police or about whether it is a criminal activity that dissidents are involved in. That is a fact of life, and, from my community's point of view, we expect whoever will be sitting in that Chair to be able to declare openly and publicly that they are in support of the police, that they oppose dissident activity, that they believe that it is criminal activity that dissidents are involved in and that they do not believe that the dissidents should have special status because they are supposedly supporting a political cause, although I have not seen much evidence of that.

I think that any person who was going to sit in your job would want the public to know that. It would not be something that you would drag out of them. Indeed, in my comments, I indicated from my knowledge of Mr McLaughlin from when I was Finance Minister and he was the Chairperson of the Finance Committee that I had no doubt about how he would respond to it. I gave him the opportunity to do so, and he took that opportunity. He said it very clearly in terms that were satisfactory to this side of the House. I do not see that that is in some way a sham or

a charade; it is necessary to see that someone who will be a Principal Deputy Speaker in this House supports the rule of law and the police and believes that dissident terrorists are dissidents and should not be given support or special status. I believe that the public will, overwhelmingly, believe that that is the right thing to do, and I am glad that Mr McLaughlin was able to declare himself in that fashion.

Mr Nesbitt: The Ulster Unionist Party did not support the creation of the post of Principal Deputy Speaker, because we did not see the need for it.

Having observed the post in action over the past number of months, we stand by our assertion that there is no need for the position. I understand that the post of Principal Deputy Speaker is, as it were, an optional extra. There is no obligation on the House to elect a Principal Deputy Speaker and I propose that we take that course of action and do not elect one. My party does not support Mr McLaughlin's nomination.

1.00 pm

Mr Dickson: Having formerly had a Principal Deputy Speaker — a position, as I understand it, for someone who is likely to be a Speaker in training — then the principle having been determined, there is no reason why we should not follow that precedent on this occasion.

I will briefly add to comments that have been made about adherence to the rule of law, in particular with regard to those in society who wish to break the law. It is the responsibility of every Member of the House to uphold the law and support the police in the carrying out of their duties, and to do that wholeheartedly and fully, regardless of where the lawbreaking comes from. It is the duty and responsibility of every Member of the House to uphold the law.

Mr Allister: As has already been said, the post of Principal Deputy Speaker is an utterly needless one. It serves no relevant function with regard to the good order and performance of the House. We all know that the position was concocted as part of a sordid deal between the DUP and Sinn Féin in order to sustain you, sir, in your position for some time at the start of this Assembly mandate. It has proved to be an utterly pointless position. However, it exists by dint of the will of the greater number in the House and I am sure that it will be filled today, although it is unnecessary. In the filling of it, Members will declare themselves as to how far they are satisfied with the quality, character and

nature of the person whose name has been placed before them.

I declare that I will oppose the nomination of Mr Mitchel McLaughlin on the basis not just that I do not think that he is fit for the office, but very specifically because of what he said, and has yet to withdraw, in respect of the callous, brutal and dastardly murder of Jean McConville. When he was interviewed on RTÉ in January 2005, Mr McLaughlin said that that was not a crime. How can anyone who thinks themselves fit to hold the office of Principal Deputy Speaker simultaneously think that of the callous kidnapping, the ripping away of a mother from her children and the taking her to a spot where she was ruthlessly and bloodthirstily killed? How anyone can think that that is not a crime is beyond my comprehension. How anyone can vote for someone who thinks that that is not a crime is beyond my comprehension.

It is all very well to have a little sham fight about the position of Deputy Speaker, and to require some weasel words, but here is the real test: does Mr McLaughlin still think that that vicious, vile murder was not a crime? He had an opportunity in the House a year ago tomorrow, when he was challenged on that issue, and through obfuscation and weasel words he refused to say that it was a crime.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Allister: Of course he thinks it was not a crime, because it was a product of a court martial of the IRA. By saying that, he accepts the IRA's spurious legitimacy and position.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member's time is gone.

Mr Allister: That is still his position, and so long as it is, he is not fit to be Principal Deputy Speaker of the House.

Mr B McCrea: Elections are good for the soul. It is a useful exercise to put the questions — not just from that side of the House — to Mr McLaughlin asking him what his opinion was on the rule of law or some other important issues. However, it is also important to know what way people are going to vote and divide in the House. Members sit over there and ask questions and then take a flimflam of an answer and say, "That is OK then, we are going to vote for him". That does not seem to me to be the real democratic process.

I have to say to people, and I will say to other people in the Assembly from different parties — the SDLP and the Alliance Party — that I thought that you had more backbone. I thought that you were rejecting sectarian carve-ups; I thought that you were trying to fight for democracy. Instead of that, you have signed up for another two-party carve-up, and when it comes to the elections, people will remember. I can tell you this here and now: I will remember. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I will remember this. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order; the Member must be heard.

Mr B McCrea: I ask this question to the people jeering on the other side: look at yourselves —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not point across the Chamber. Remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr B McCrea: I appreciate the direction, Mr Speaker. I am merely trying to point out that it is good to ask the right questions in a Chamber like this. However, unless you get the correct answers, you should follow your conscience, and that is the issue.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for giving way. Recently, the Member made great stock of the need for people to represent all of the people from all of the communities in Northern Ireland and to promote reconciliation. How, therefore, can the Member justify a situation where three out of four Speakers would have been designated as unionist in a society that is made up of people from a range of different backgrounds?

Mr B McCrea: Because, Mr Speaker, we are trying to move matters forward. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: There seems to be some mirth and merriment on the issue. I can only surmise that Members do not understand the arguments. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: What you are seeing here is an emerging opposition. We reject the five-party collection of which that Minister is a part: that

Minister provides the fig leaf for a sectarian future that this country does not need, and I will not stand for it, and you need to think very carefully —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: — about who you are going to —

Mr Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr B McCrea: — vote for in this election.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCallister: It is on record that I and other colleagues had issues about creating the post of Principal Deputy Speaker. It creates a hierarchy among the Deputy Speakers that, quite frankly, I do not think is helpful. We spoke on that at the time of the debate, and we voted that way when the post was created.

Obviously, the two largest parties in here do the Executive's bidding with little regard for the Chamber or the way in which the Chamber should work, should function and should represent all of the membership in here. Whether you agree with that individual or not, we should all have certain rights in the Chamber. The Speaker is the role, and when the Deputy Speakers are in the Chair, they take on that role. That is why it is important. That is why I reject the post of Principal Deputy Speaker, and that is why we should not be supporting it.

Effectively, Mr Speaker, Members quite rightly know that when they elect the Principal Deputy Speaker today, they are electing your replacement. I, like other colleagues, Mr Speaker, hope that that is not for a very long time, but they effectively will be electing your replacement, and that is what colleagues on the DUP Benches should reflect on today, and that is what they should be thinking about. A deal was done a couple of years ago, and they are going to stick to it. I suppose it is a surprise that they are sticking to a commitment that they gave in private. That is why we should reject this proposal and reject the idea of a Principal Deputy Speaker.

Question put, That the nomination of Deputy Speaker McLaughlin to act as Principal Deputy Speaker be approved.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 70; Noes 28.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

UNIONIST:

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

OTHER:

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Fearon and Mr McMullan.

NOES

NATIONALIST:

Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McDevitt, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKevitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers.

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Beggs, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

OTHER:

Mr Agnew.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Rogers and Mr Swann.

Total Votes 98 Total Ayes 70 [71.4%]

Nationalist Votes 39 Nationalist Ayes 27 [69.2%]

Unionist Votes 50 Unionist Ayes 35 [70.0%]
Other Votes 9 Other Ayes 8 [88.9%]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the nomination of Deputy Speaker McLaughlin to act as Principal Deputy Speaker be approved.

Mr Speaker: Once again, I offer my congratulations to our new Principal Deputy Speaker. I certainly look forward to working with Mr McLaughlin over the next number of months.

I ask Members to take their ease as we move to the next item of business.

Executive Committee Business

Tobacco Retailers Bill: First Stage

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to introduce the Tobacco Retailers Bill [NIA Bill 19/11-15], which is a Bill to make provision for a register of tobacco retailers; to make provision for dealing with the persistent commission of tobacco offences; to confer additional powers of enforcement in relation to offences under Articles 3 and 4 of the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1978; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move that the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

The regulations are made under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979. They increase the compensation payable under the order to sufferers of certain dust-related diseases and their dependants who satisfy the conditions of entitlement on or after the day on which the regulations come into operation. The increase in amounts payable under the order maintain parity with the corresponding scheme operating in Great Britain and are in line with the annual uprating of social security benefits. The corresponding Great Britain regulations came into force on 1 April 2013. On claims made here since that date, the difference between the 2012-13 and 2013-14 amounts will be paid on an extra-statutory basis.

I will outline briefly the purpose of the order. People suffering from an industrial disease can sue their employer if that disease was contracted as a result of working for that employer. Some diseases covered by the order can take years to develop symptoms and may not be diagnosed until decades after exposure to the dust. Given the time frames involved, it is possible that the employers responsible may

no longer exist. Consequently, sufferers and their dependants can experience great difficulty in obtaining compensation.

The scheme was introduced in 1979 to provide a lump sum payment for sufferers unable to pursue employers through the courts because the employers are no longer in business. To receive a payment under the scheme, a person must have been awarded industrial injuries disablement benefit. A claim can also be made by dependants after a sufferer's death. To receive the payment, there must be no relevant employer who can be sued, and court action must not have been brought or compensation received in respect of any of the diseases for which a person is claiming.

The lump sum payment is in addition to the weekly industrial injuries disablement benefit that is paid for the same disease. The scheme covers five respiratory diseases, most of which are directly related to asbestos exposure. They are mesothelioma; diffuse pleural thickening; primary carcinoma of the lung; byssinosis; and pneumoconiosis, which includes asbestosis. The lump sum payment is based on the age of the sufferer and the level of disability, with higher amounts paid to people with higher levels of disability and whose disability arises at an early age. Lower amounts are payable to dependants who claim after a sufferer has died. The maximum amount that can be paid from 1 April 2013 is just over £83,330 for a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis. The amounts payable under the scheme have been increased by 2.2% in line with this year's uprating of industrial injuries benefits. The increase will help to ensure that the compensation provided under the order maintains its value.

I am sure that Members across the Assembly will agree on the importance of support to those suffering from these terrible diseases and will, therefore, support the regulations.

1.30 pm

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Social Development Committee, I support the motion, and I thank the Minister for moving it.

The Committee dealt with the proposal on pneumoconiosis at its meeting on 14 February, and it considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 11 March 2013. The Committee was, of course, content that the rule be made. Suffice it to say that, as the Minister mentioned,

the regulations will increase the amounts payable to sufferers of certain dust-related diseases, which are noted in the regulations, or the dependants of persons who were disabled by such a disease before they died. In each case, the increase is 2.2%. The Social Development Committee recommends that the Assembly affirm the statutory rule.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased with the support for the regulations across the Assembly. I thank Mr Maskey and the Social Development Committee for the positive way in which they dealt with the regulations. I am certain that we all want to ensure that the value of compensation under the 1979 order is not eroded by inflation, and the regulations will make sure that that does not happen. I therefore commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

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

That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

The regulations will be made under the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. They will increase the compensation payable under the Act to persons diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma or, if the person has died, their dependants. The amounts payable under the order are increased in line with the corresponding scheme operating in England, Scotland and Wales.

I will outline briefly the scheme's purpose. The mesothelioma scheme provides financial support within a matter of weeks without the need to establish an occupational link or, indeed, any causal link. Many people who were not previously eligible for help — for example, those who are unable to pursue a civil claim or to claim a lump sum under the

Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979 — now have access to financial help for this terrible disease. That means that sufferers of mesothelioma are eligible for a payment regardless of whether they were employees or self-employed or, indeed, never worked, provided that they have not already received a compensation payment from another source. The regulations increase the amounts payable under the mesothelioma scheme by 2.2% in line with the uprating of industrial injuries benefits from April 2013. For example, the amount payable to a person aged 37 or under at diagnosis will be increased from £81,536 to £83,330, which is the same maximum that can be paid from April 2013 under the pneumoconiosis scheme.

I am sure that Members across the Assembly will warmly welcome the increase in the amounts payable, thus ensuring that compensation provided under the scheme maintains its value. I am sure that Members across the Assembly will welcome that and support the regulations.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Again, I thank the Minister for bringing the proposals for mesothelioma.

The Committee dealt with the matter on 14 February and formally with the statutory rule at its meeting on 14 March. Of course, the Committee was unanimously content to support the motion, so I will not rehearse the Minister's remarks. The Committee is happy to recommend that the Assembly approve the statutory rule.

Mr McCausland: I am again pleased with the consensus of support for the regulations across the Assembly. I again thank the Chairman and the Social Development Committee for the positive way in which they dealt with the regulations.

I am sure that we all want to ensure that the increased lump sum compensation payments under the Mesothelioma Act continue to be available to those who contract this terrible disease or to their dependants. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Committee Business

Suicide Prevention

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

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the significant rise in suicide rates in Northern Ireland over the last 15 years; and calls on the Executive to prioritise suicide prevention strategies.

Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. I am delighted to be able to propose the motion on behalf of the Committee.

Suicide is one of the biggest killers in our community, with around 300 people taking their own life each year. The overall suicide rate has doubled in the past 30 years from 7.7 per 100,000 of the population in 1980 to a peak of 17.4 in 2010. For males, the increase has been even steeper, from 9.9 per 100,000 of the population in 1980 to a peak of 27.1 in 2010. Over the same period, the female rate has risen from 5.5 per 100,000 of the population in 1980 to eight in 2010. Suicide is a major public health issue, and there is a need for both crisis response and preventative interventions to address it. We need an approach that takes in the underlying causes of mental ill health and, at the same time, provides support for those suffering from it.

The Committee welcomes the Department's commitment to the Protect Life strategy, which has been effective overall in raising awareness of suicide prevention, engaging with families and communities and helping to provide a focus for suicide prevention and intervention. The non-recurrent nature of funding for Protect Life initiatives has, however, made it difficult to plan and sustain effective programmes and support services to prevent suicide. That is particularly difficult for the community and voluntary sectors, which currently receive the majority of Protect Life funding. There is also an issue of access to funding for groups, with obstacles for new groups that wish to apply.

The Committee is also concerned about whether there really is a joined-up approach and a commitment across all Departments to tackling suicide. We, as a Committee, believe that suicide prevention has to be a priority right across the Executive. Although the Programme for Government notes that an outcome of health improvement work is a reduction in suicide, there are no specific commitments or priorities identified for suicide prevention. That has the knock-on effect of suicide prevention not being identified by Departments other than the Health Department as a key part of their business plans.

Unfortunately, the recent economic downturn has had an impact on the rate of suicide. The restricted funding climate has impacted on community and voluntary sector responses to suicide intervention and prevention and statutory service provision. Committee members recently met representatives of the East Belfast Community Counselling Centre, which has seen the need for its services rise sharply. They put that down partly to the impact of economic circumstances and welfare reform on people's mental health and, indeed, their ability to cope with everyday life.

To mark World Suicide Prevention Day last September, the Committee invited young people to come to the Assembly and tell us about the things that affected their lives. Members, Committee Chairs and Ministers, as well as senior civil servants, attended the event and engaged directly with the young people. They told us about the availability of support and counselling in schools, the difficulties in finding work and the provision of services in their communities. Those issues affect their lives and well-being, but they are not all the responsibility of one Department.

Suicide affects everybody; it is cross-cutting. I know that Members and their families have been either directly or indirectly affected by the issues of suicide and mental health. There was no target set in the last Programme for Government to deal with suicide or suicide prevention strategies. We need to ensure that, in the next Programme for Government, these strategies are a priority across all Departments. Indeed, the last ministerial co-ordination group on suicide prevention was held on 30 January. I have raised this numerous times. Prior to that, it had not met for 18 months, although I know it is due to meet in August. In fairness, when I raised this issue with the Health Minister and with OFMDFM, they ensured that the group met. It has met twice, but I am concerned: if it met in January and is not due to meet again until August, where is the priority in dealing with

suicide and mental health? What message does that send out about how we prioritise?

I want to record my appreciation of the Health Minister and OFMDFM for their focus on these issues. I appreciate the work that they do. I also appreciate the work being done in the community and voluntary sector and by medical professionals, but the reality is that suicide and mental health issues continue to rise, and we need a cross-departmental strategy approach to the problem.

Suicide has a devastating effect on individuals, families and communities. Every week, more than five people die by suicide here. That is five of our brothers, our sisters, our mothers, our fathers, our children and our neighbours. Five people every week die through suicide — five times more than were killed in road accidents last year. In fact, I want to give some statistics. In 2010, there were 313 deaths due to suicide, while 55 people died in road traffic accidents. The year 2010 was significant, as it marked the highest occurrence of death by suicide, but it was also the first year in which road traffic deaths dropped below 100 since records began in 1931. That has to be welcomed. However, over the past 30 years, the overall suicide rate has doubled while deaths on the road have fallen by three quarters. Achieving the reduction in death on our roads involved commitment, co-operation and energy between a number of Departments. That has to be welcomed. It involved the commitment of agencies in DOE, DRD's Roads Service, the PSNI, the Fire and Rescue Service and the Ambulance Service, among others, to deliver a programme of road safety education, advertising campaigns, engineering and enforcement initiatives. Every life lost in any circumstances is a tragedy, but a greater tragedy is not to learn lessons that can prevent future deaths. The lesson to be learned here is that co-operation across Departments saves lives.

The Committee is asking the Executive to take a lead in co-ordinating a cross-departmental approach that will target the underlying causes of mental ill health. That needs to involve the promotion of good mental health in our schools to give our children the skills to deal with life's problems and support for those who need help in times of crisis. We would like to see the same co-operation and commitment as has led to a steady decline in road deaths over the last 30 years being focused on suicide prevention. We would like to see a situation where suicide and mental well-being is not solely a health problem but an opportunity to develop a

strategy to build mental resilience in our communities.

Over the past year, in my role as Chair of the Committee, I have sought meetings with a number of Ministers to bring suicide prevention to their attention and to find out what role their Department is playing. Just this morning, I met the deputy First Minister, who has reaffirmed his commitment and the commitment of OFMDFM on the issue of suicide prevention strategies. That is to be welcomed. The Health Minister will introduce a revised suicide prevention strategy over the next few years, and that will give us the opportunity to make sure that Departments such as Education, Justice, Social Development, Employment and Learning, DCAL, DARD and indeed all Departments play a full and coordinated role in reducing deaths from suicide.

The Committee is unanimous on the motion. We are delighted that we are able to bring it forward. The Assembly needs to send out a clear message. We were able to reduce deaths on our roads by a significant percentage because people worked together. Let us ensure that we reduce death by suicide and mental health issues because everyone works together. If we are honestly and truthfully committed to tackling health inequalities and issues around suicide and mental health, we need to get away from Departments working in silos. We need an Executive approach to this. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

1.45 pm

Ms P Bradley: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the motion.

Suicide has long been a taboo issue in our society. We are not comfortable talking about it, nor do we want to think that it could affect any one of our families. However, the sad fact is that it so easily could. Look around the Chamber today: any one of us may have been touched by suicide or could be at risk of suicide, and you would never know.

Over the past 15 years, we have seen a stark rise in those completing or attempting suicide. We have to bear it in mind that not all completed suicides or attempts by people to take their own life are accurately reported, so there is a hidden number that we do not know about. Belfast is one of the areas most affected by the phenomenon. I welcome the fact that, since April 2012, the PHA has put in place a system to speed up the notification of suspected deaths by suicide. That may help those in the statutory and voluntary agencies

who are trying to reduce the numbers and react to deaths.

It is well known that, where a person completes suicide in a family or community, those in that grouping are more at risk of also completing or attempting to complete suicide. I am dismayed that suicide seems to be an issue that is sexy for some of the time and then forgotten about for the rest of the time. No other major killer would be treated in that way. There is recognition in the health profession that it is one of our biggest killers. The health system alone cannot deal with that, nor is it always appropriate for it to do so. If we expect the third sector to do its part in addressing the issue in partnership, we have to ensure that it is properly resourced and trained to do so. We cannot afford to have a piecemeal approach to the issue. We know the impact that courses such as ASSIST and Mental Health First Aid have on increasing the capacity in communities to help to address the issue, but we must go further. We must ensure that we remove the stigma of mental health problems. We must remove the stigma in our society of talking about our feelings and increase the promotion of good emotional health and resilience. With men being the most at-risk group for suicide, we must welcome courses such as the Man Matters course run by the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) and the introduction of the various MensSheds projects that are appearing all over the country. Those are examples of good work by the third sector in our community, and they must be applauded.

We can further build on that by having a cross-departmental approach. We know that the years of terror and violence inflicted across Northern Ireland has had an impact on the rate of suicide. We know that deprivation has a direct impact, and we know that the impact of family breakdowns also has a direct correlation to the rate of suicide.

Cancer was once a big taboo subject in our society. By destigmatising the word, we have people more prepared to come forward when they notice changes that could signal that something is wrong. We need to make suicide the same. We need to have more safe places. For many, hospitals are not that place. We need to make our communities more aware of the warning signs. We must ensure that suicide is not thought of as the only option. These are lives lost, young and old. Families and communities are left with a massive void. I have said many times in the Chamber that we, as elected representatives, have a duty to protect the vulnerable. Through a robust

suicide prevention strategy, we can go some way to ensuring that lives are saved.

Mr McDevitt: I am happy to contribute to the debate. I guess that it is a measure of the significance of suicide as an issue in our society that this is the third or fourth occasion in recent years that the House has taken time to debate the topic.

As colleagues have said, the current recession, the extent to which there is marginalisation in our society, certain negative online cultures, the existence of hate and prejudice and an unhealthy relationship with stigma all fuel or contribute to the incidence of suicide in this part of the world. They all, I suppose, help to fester the conditions in which suicide is seen or deemed to be a solution. Of course, as is said over and over again by people at every level in society, suicide is not a solution and never will be.

The huge amount of work that has been done at community level over the past decade, particularly with young people, must again be acknowledged. So many innovative and positive responses to suicide cultures that were emerging, often, as I said, among young people, have been developed in local communities. That work needs to be supported, but it also needs to be, if you like, mainstreamed and given the opportunity to be deepened and to move beyond being simply about intervention or very basic support into something that is much more structured and sustainable. If that means that all of us — the people who work at community level, those working in the trusts, in primary care and in social care, GPs and social workers — need to challenge ourselves a little, so be it. For me, it is about everyone in society benefiting from the bits that are done really well and making sure that the really good practices, whether they emerge in the community sector, in social care environments, among social workers or are used by certain GPs, are shared and become available to us all.

Given the decade that we are in and the issues that we face as a society, it is also worth turning our mind to the impact that suicide has on older generations and the fact that people from older generations take their life. As an Assembly and a society, we need to become much more aware of the issue of trauma in our society and to develop a better understanding of it. There is growing evidence that we live in a society in which an awful lot of post-conflict trauma is present. That manifests itself in all sorts of ways, but it is there. It is there among the survivor community, among those who describe

themselves as victims or the families of victims, but it is also there in all sorts of very small ways among those who do not consider themselves to be much more than people who just lived through the Troubles.

A failure to acknowledge the fact that conflict-related trauma is present among us would be a very bad thing indeed. It would undermine our duty to a generation that is well represented in the House and lived through and survived the Troubles. It would also cost us very dearly not just in human terms but economically and socially in the long term. We tend to think about suicide as a young person's crisis and problem. When we have debates such as this one, and as we get to the point — we are getting to it — of maturing as a society after conflict, we should face up to the very real threat of post-conflict trauma that is among us. I am very happy to support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I also support the motion tabled in the name of the Chair of the Health Committee. I also thank the Assembly's Research and Information Service for its useful briefing on the subject.

With recorded suicide rates in Northern Ireland more than doubling over the past 30 years from 7.7 per 100,000 in 1980 to 17.4, it is clear that Northern Ireland faces a particularly large challenge in bringing about a reduction in the number of suicides, which has been increasing. The statistics are concerning. Since 2003 in particular, there has been a significant increase. I notice that, in highlighting this, Mike Tomlinson indicated that it was against a backdrop of a lowering of or generally slow decline in levels of suicide in England and Scotland, even in the most deprived north-east England region. So, why is suicide having a particularly adverse effect here?

Statistics show that suicide is much more prevalent among males. Men account for almost three quarters of suicides during the period. Suicide affects a huge number of individuals and families, and a single incident affects many people. Friends and family are left to think whether they could have spotted a cry for help or what they could have done differently. However, no one fully understands the working of the mind.

I welcome the motion's call for the Executive to do more. Although the Department of Health and its Minister have a key role in this area, it is clear that other Departments must also play a major part. I think of how the Department of Education can encourage mental well-being through healthy lifestyles among young people

at our schools and by increasing their awareness of the support and counselling that is available in schools or in the community for those who may need it.

The Department of Justice has a role because many of those in the justice system have mental health difficulties or addictions, all of which can increase the risk of suicide. Here, I declare an interest because of my involvement in the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group. The abuse of alcohol and drugs — legal or illegal — can destabilise an individual and adversely affect a person's well-being.

I also think of DARD and the issue of rural isolation, which is recognised widely as being a factor in the rural community. Over the past number of years and in recent months, in particular, extreme weather has resulted in significant financial pressures on such communities.

I believe that DCAL can also have a role because of the importance of sport, arts and music, all of which are widely recognised as contributing to good mental health and well-being and as having an important role in preventative work. So, too, has OFMDFM, which, through its responsibility for children and young people, has a role in preventing the next generation from suffering from this illness and event. OFMDFM also has a role in co-ordinating the Executive response.

The Health Minister recently indicated that the Justice Minister was the only Minister to turn up at the last meeting of the ministerial co-ordination group on the issue. It is vital that all Ministers make this an important issue in their Department and demonstrate awareness of that importance.

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

The recent knowledge exchange seminar in Parliament Buildings also pointed towards the legacy of the conflict as a major contributory factor, with paramilitary groups having inflicted pain and punishment and mentally scarred individuals not only through past events that still trouble such individuals but, sadly, through some still happening today. As a community, we must all work together to bring that activity to an end and to rely entirely on the criminal justice system.

Other reasons for the increasing occurrence of suicide include reporting methods, economic pressures, increased drug and alcohol abuse and changes to protective or resilient factors

such as smaller family units, family breakdown and a reduction in church attendance. A number of issues actually strengthen an individual against times of trouble. So, there are significant pressures in our society.

I also pay tribute to Lifeline for its work and to a number of individuals who have suffered personally, including Carol Goodall in my constituency, who works with Preventing Addiction Larne (PAL) and PIPS —

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

Mr Beggs: — and channels her efforts into preventative work so that others do not have to suffer.

2.00 pm

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Chair of the Health Committee, Sue Ramsey, for bringing this important issue to the Assembly today. The Alliance Party and I fully support the motion.

I had prepared my contribution to the debate some time ago, but things changed dramatically for me last Tuesday. Last Tuesday morning, I was in the Chamber taking part in the business of the day when I was asked to take a phone call from home. A hysterical voice at the other end of the phone told me to come home immediately. My 39-year-old son-in-law had been found dead in our garage. I raced to the home of my daughter to be confronted with an ambulance, police and other personnel and, of course, a distraught daughter and family members, and I was told of the circumstances of the tragedy.

Hugh O'Prey, my son-in-law, had fallen victim to this horrible illness. He was a big, strong family man with everything to live for — a good home, a wonderful, hard-working wife, a fantastic eight-year-old daughter and a good job. He was the principal of the local primary school. Now, our families and, indeed, the whole community are faced with something that we simply cannot understand. The question is this: why, why, why? It has been asked in Northern Ireland over 300 times. We are not the first family to endure this shocking experience. Some 300 people in Northern Ireland have lost their life in such unexplained circumstances — 300 human beings, all good people. It is far too many, and we must continue to strive for answers and prevention.

I very much welcome the Minister's commitment and his Department's fight against suicide.

Much work continues to fulfil the Protect Life strategy, and the efforts of the Public Health Agency continue, particularly the recent TV ad, Minding Your Head, on looking after your mental health, but, unfortunately, we continue to lose people to this illness. I fully support the efforts made by the ministerial co-ordination group on suicide prevention and, indeed, the all-island Young Men and Suicide project. On 13 January this year, the Health Committee had a briefing from the Public Health Agency and was able to hear about all of the activity that it operates. The agency certainly does sterling work, but there really must be a much bigger reduction in the number of deaths through suicide right across Northern Ireland.

On 10 September last year, World Suicide Prevention Day, the Assembly agreed to fully support the recommendations contained in the Protect Life strategy. I fully congratulate and commend organisations throughout Northern Ireland that continue to work in this difficult and sometimes harrowing aspect of our mental health service.

In conclusion, I refer again to my experience last week, and I make an appeal to John O'Dowd as Minister of Education and, indeed, to other Departments as it applies to them. My son-in-law was a teacher, as is my daughter. All teachers do sterling work. Maybe, just maybe, they are being asked to stretch themselves to breaking point. Anybody in the Chamber who has family members who are teachers will know exactly what I am speaking about. They do not finish at 3.00 pm; they come home with an armful of cases and work until all hours of the night. Officials must look for signs of over-ask. I am thinking of targets, results, inspections and so on. There is a very fine line between success and disaster. Of course, we all want success, but at what price? We need to look after all our providers and prevent people going over the edge and into the abyss.

There is so much more to be said on the issue, and I thank Members who have already spoken. They have covered most of what was needed. Cross-agency working, training, education, the fulfilment of the Bamford report, economic factors, deprivation —

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

Mr McCarthy: Until we get on top of this issue, we will have more Hugh O'Preys, more sadness, more grief and more tears. We need action, and we need action now.

Mr Dunne: First, I extend my sympathy and that of our party to Kieran and his family on this very sad occasion. We trust that God will bless you and give you strength. We appreciate the hard work that you do in the Strangford constituency, and we recognise your courage in speaking here today.

We all welcome the opportunity to speak on this important motion and to speak again on an issue that hits people across Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, suicide continues to be a real problem for our society. I am sure that everyone in the House knows someone who has very tragically taken their own life. We all know the devastating impacts for those who are left behind. Indeed, we have witnessed the evidence even here today. Sadly, suicide can touch the lives of the young and old, the rich and poor. It transcends all boundaries and is something that will not be resolved overnight. Although tackling suicide is a challenge, we must continue to do everything that we can to reduce and help to remove this terrible problem. I know that the Health Minister and his Department have already done much good work to tackle the issue, and I commend him for the active interest that he has taken to date.

Many issues have been identified as causes of suicide, and other Members who contributed referred to some of them. Given the current economic climate, debt can be a huge challenge for many, especially with the property slump. Recently, a personal friend of mine of many years tragically ended his life after getting into financial difficulty, feeling that the pain was just too much to bear. Cyberbullying through social media is also becoming an ever-increasing issue for young people. It should not be overlooked or underestimated. The bully now is in our children's pockets. Parents need to be properly educated on the risks of the internet. Teachers and schools must have proper anti-bullying policies in place, with proper counselling available to all pupils. Many homes have a clear lack of family support for young people, and that can often lead to young people having negative thoughts and feeling that they have nowhere to turn. Alcohol abuse is another major problem that can devastate lives, with low-price drink being readily available through supermarkets and off-licences.

There is room for improvement in further promoting public awareness. Our young people must be made more aware of the devastation that suicide can cause for those left behind. Support structures must be put in place, but people must be made aware of them so that those most in need can readily access them. The key to tackling suicide is ensuring that

vulnerable people know who to contact and where to go to find that much-needed help and support.

As with many health issues, early intervention and detection are crucial to helping to reduce suicide rates across Northern Ireland. We have seen how effective public awareness campaigns have been in reducing the number of road accidents. I feel that more could be done to highlight issues around suicide through public awareness campaigns across the media. The health service alone cannot eradicate suicide from our society. That will be achieved only with cross-cutting action involving a range of Departments and agencies working together to tackle this growing problem. The community and voluntary sector has a key role to play, as is often the case, at the forefront of dealing with vulnerable people. That sector must continue to help to reduce the risk of further suicides across our population in conjunction with schools, sports groups, libraries, rural networks, prison staff, police and our churches. They all have key roles to play. Groups such as North Down Samaritans, based in Bangor, do a tremendous job in supporting vulnerable people. It would be remiss of me today not to pay tribute to those groups —

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

Mr Dunne: — which give up their time to do such valuable work.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion and would like to offer my sympathy and that of my party to Kieran and his family in their tragic loss.

As has been said, our suicide rate has doubled in the past 30 years. Surely it is an indictment of the society in which we live that people are driven to that point. I want to pay tribute to the Public Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide and Self-Harm (PIPS) organisation in Newry in my constituency for the work that it does and continues to do in suicide awareness and prevention.

In the space of 10 months in the Newry area, three young men in their 30s who lived within 200 yards of one another took their own life in very tragic circumstances. That, to a large extent, galvanised the community. PIPS facilitated meetings that brought together all the statutory and voluntary agencies, including the PSNI, the trust, Lifeline and other organisations to help people to come to terms with the trauma that had been visited on that small community.

As a result, many of the young men's friends, neighbours and relations have taken counselling courses and suicide prevention and awareness courses and are now very much involved in that area of work. That has to be seen as something beneficial that has come out of such tragic circumstances.

I have attended PIPS services, which are held in churches every Christmas and include all denominations. One of the most poignant things at those services every year is a tree on which relatives and friends put cards containing the names of people who have taken their own life during that year. The sad fact is that, every year, the numbers increase; they do not decrease. That is borne out by the statistics.

Mr McDevitt, I think, said that suicide was not just the preserve of young people. In the past year in my constituency, an 82-year-old man took his own life. The issue of rural isolation has been raised, and it really needs to be addressed.

It is somewhat ironic that the Minister is, rightly, promoting Transforming Your Care and the concept of caring for people in the community with a strong support infrastructure, yet, on the other hand, we have the advent of welfare reform, which will cut benefits and put people in situations in which they will feel that they cannot cope. The issue of financial distress has been raised, and we need to be aware of that, address it and take it into account when those draconian measures are being implemented.

I sit on the Committee for Social Development and the Health Committee, and it is clear to me that there are many overarching, cross-departmental issues that need to be addressed by those two Departments. However, other Departments, such as the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and DARD, which is also involved in rural isolation programmes, need to take stock and put forward ideas to implement suicide prevention programmes in a structured and affirmative way. I support the motion and commend the Health Committee for tabling it.

Ms Brown: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the motion. I commend Mr McCarthy for speaking today in what must be incredibly difficult circumstances. I extend my heartfelt sympathy to you, Kieran, your daughter and, of course, the entire family.

Suicide has a devastating impact on the lives of far too many families in Northern Ireland. The startling increase in the number of deaths by suicide over the last 15 years is deeply

concerning. My constituency, South Antrim, has suffered terribly. Over the last 10 years, there has been an average of over 11 deaths per year, which is nearly a 100% increase on the figure for the previous decade.

2.15 pm

In January, I tabled an Adjournment debate about mental health service provision in South Antrim. In that debate, I highlighted the concerns raised by members of the public who had held a public meeting about the number of deaths by suicide in the area. The series of tragedies motivated the organisers of the meeting to tackle the scourge of suicide and raise awareness of mental health issues in the community. At that meeting, I was struck by a number of things, not least the real benefit to our communities when ordinary people decide to take action and work together across all divides for the greater good. At a time when community relations in Northern Ireland have been under such severe strain, this was a real example of a positive and uniting initiative. I hope that it continues to make progress, and I will certainly do whatever I can to ensure that it does.

I was also struck by the sheer number of groups, both voluntary and charitable, that were there that day to talk about their work and highlight their services in the field of mental health. Many of those present were not aware of the existence of the other groups in the area or the extent of the resources already available. Therefore, I respectfully observe that one of the key difficulties that we face is highlighting these services; ensuring that they can operate in a joined-up way; avoiding duplication; and developing common themes and strategies in a cohesive framework.

Across government today, we are constantly looking at a means of delivering more for less, particularly in the health, community and voluntary sectors. The meeting that I attended seemed to have the potential to do just that. I urge the Executive to recognise that effort and take urgent measures to support and promote it. As a first step in that process, I ask the Minister for another update report on his Department's strategy and, in particular, on what his Department is doing to ensure that communities are informed and supported.

Across all our constituencies, we are fortunate to have so many dedicated individuals and groups working to address mental health issues. I pay tribute to them and ask the Minister and the Executive to offer them full support as we all endeavour to ensure that, as

a society, we work together for the aim of good mental health for everyone. Our young people will be our future. We cannot ignore the statistics, which highlight the desperate need to protect them and keep them safe.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion as a member of the Health Committee. At this point, I, too, want to express my deepest condolences to Kieran and his family. I hope that you and your family get every support that you need at this very difficult time.

As has rightly been pointed out, suicide has blighted our island, with almost every city and village knowing the pain of losing people through suicide. Yet the question for us in the House is this: do we do enough to tackle it? In our health systems right across the island, mental health protection is considerably lower down the importance scale than physical health in terms of treatment and research investment. Yet mental illness can lead to more lethal outcomes than many physical illnesses. The European average spend on mental health is 12% of the budget. We need to increase our spending to bring it in line with that average.

We can only begin to tackle mental health issues when we tackle the stigma associated with mental ill health and suicide. I commend the groups, including NIAMH with its anti-stigma campaign, that do vital work in this area. Research has indicated that, at any one time, 20% of adults will suffer from mental health problems and that, while 90% of people with mental health problems want to work, only 20% actually do. This week, Assembly research has shown us that 33% of appointments that are cancelled by hospital providers relate to mental illness. Recent Assembly research indicated that the gap between suicide rates in the most deprived and the least deprived areas is 73%. Statistics from the Child Poverty Action Group highlight that in some areas, including my constituency, more than 60% of children live in poverty. That statistic is stark and cannot be removed from this debate.

As pointed out by Members who have spoken, 313 suicides were recorded in 2010 in the North of Ireland. We, therefore, need an overview of the impact of funding for tackling suicide in our communities. Is that funding targeting the need? Is that support having the desired outcome? Prevention, early intervention and support must be accessible, local and within communities.

Recent research by Mike Tomlinson, as has been rightly pointed out, highlighted how

coming out of conflict cannot be ignored in this critical debate. The Institute of Public Health in Ireland referred to the need for the preferential resourcing of disadvantaged communities. We need to look at the extension of dedicated psychiatric liaison teams to all maternity and children's hospitals. We need to train health professionals and educators in mental well-being, using established and internationally endorsed training modules that will enable carers of our children to assess and recognise vulnerability and emerging mental health difficulties from infancy onwards. We need GP support service provision to identify training needs and support the provision of an appropriate, continuous and professional development response to dealing with first-stage mental health problems.

We need, therefore, to take the issue of suicide seriously and adapt similar strategies to those that lower deaths from cancer, heart disease and road traffic accidents so that, by providing the support and prevention that should be in place now, we stop losing our loved ones.

Mr Gardiner: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I extend to Mr McCarthy sincere sympathy on his recent bereavement.

With one million deaths by suicide across the world each year, with a suicide occurring worldwide every 40 seconds, with suicide being the second biggest cause of death among 15- to 19-year-olds, with the suicide rate for men in the United Kingdom at its highest since 2002 and with the rate of male suicide being three to five times higher than the rate of female suicide, it is right that the Assembly is debating the issue today. I thank Ms Sue Ramsey, the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for bringing the matter before the House this afternoon.

The suicide rate for the United Kingdom is at its highest since 2004, and there seems to have been a significant increase between 2010 and 2011, from 11.1 deaths to 11.8 deaths per 100,000. It is difficult not to see the economic downturn as a major factor in the rise in suicide rates.

Research by the Samaritans shows that disadvantaged men in their middle years are especially vulnerable to suicide. Disadvantaged men in midlife face a perfect storm of challenges: unemployment, deprivation, social isolation, changing definitions of what it is to be a man, alcohol misuse, demographic changes and changes in the labour market. Those challenges have had a dramatic effect on their work, their

relationships and even their identity. Many victims feel worthless and undervalued and have a deep sense of shame. Men are defined so often by their job and by what they do, so for that group of middle-aged men, the increase in unemployment may particularly disadvantage them. Unemployment can also contribute to relationship strains, problems with marriages and social isolation. Suicide rates may well be underestimated, and many deaths that are suicides are wrongly attributed to factors such as road accidents, drug misuse and so on.

There are practical actions that we can take to make a difference. A study released this February by Oxford University found that deaths from paracetamol overdoses had fallen by 43% in the 11 years since the law on packet sizes was changed. If the means of suicide is removed, it can be enough. The media also have an important responsibility in reporting deaths by suicide. Information in the press about suicide methods can have a profound effect on vulnerable people, and that information must be controlled to keep copycat incidents to an absolute minimum.

I support the motion and believe that it will help to focus the public on the issues that the community faces today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr George Robinson.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Food Standards Agency: Horse Meat

1. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she last met with the Food Standards Agency regarding the horse meat scandal. (AQO 3760/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Since 15 January, I have met Food Standards Agency (FSA) officials on several occasions to discuss the horse meat issue. The dates of the meetings were 5, 7, 13, 15 and 18 February. At my most recent meeting on 18 February, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety were also present. I had planned to meet with FSA in the week commencing 25 March but was unable to do so because of issues arising from the snow. My officials have also been in regular contact with FSA, formally and informally, throughout the three months since the scandal came to light here, most recently concerning the finding of phenylbutazone (bute) in corned beef that had been contaminated with horse meat and the recall of the substantial amount of material handled through the trader in the Netherlands. I am reassured that neither of these two recent incidents has affected the situation in the North, where consumers can continue to have confidence in produce that has been sourced from local farms and processors.

Lord Morrow: I am sure that the Minister accepts that this has a negative impact on our whole meat industry. Bearing that in mind, will she tell us today how many, if any, prosecutions will follow as a result of her inquiries to date?

Mrs O'Neill: As I have said to the House many times, FSA is in the lead on the investigations, which are ongoing. To my knowledge, no prosecutions have arisen from any issues in the North. I am led to believe that there have been prosecutions in other countries. Investigations are ongoing not only at a local level but at an EU level because of the nature of the situation and what has transpired over the past number of months. I am happy to keep the Member

updated as anything such as that occurs. A number of investigations are ongoing, and if there are instances in which people have been identified as being involved in fraudulent or criminal activity, they should be prosecuted, and rightly so.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us what additional controls are now involved in the food chain?

Mrs O'Neill: It remains the responsibility of all food businesses, including processors, catering suppliers and retailers, to ensure that the food that they sell is exactly what it says on the label. The EU initially agreed to DNA testing on food samples for one month, with a possible extension to two months. Member states are to notify the EU's rapid alert system for food and feed of tests that show over 1% horse meat in mislabelled products. Member states are being asked to take one sample per 50 tons of horse meat for bute testing, with a minimum of five per country. The EU will finance 75% of the costs, with each DNA test costing up to €400. A programme of enhanced food standard inspections of approved meat products, preparation establishments and cold stores commenced here on 6 February, conducted by district council and Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) officials. All cold stores, meat-processing plants and cutting plants here have now been visited. I also welcomed the commitment from the Commission to accelerate the production of its report on the labelling of the origin of meat in processed products. However, the report must be supported by a full and proper impact assessment that will allow the cost and practicality of any extension to the existing origin-labelling controls to be fully considered.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister detail whether she believes that the current regulations on the labelling of meat products are as strong as they need to be to allow the authorities to bring before the courts every single person or party that is criminally involved in the meat scandal?

Mrs O'Neill: There is an issue with confidence in the food chain, and, as I have consistently said throughout the crisis, our local industry maintains a high reputation, is fully traceable and is not involved in this incident. We are talking about processed food, and an issue with labelling needs to be resolved. By the end of the year, we expect the EU to bring forward more discussions and possibly to look to regulations on country-of-origin labelling. We also need to factor into that discussion a

delegation to represent the needs of the local industry here, which wishes, in some instances, to label its produce as British and also wants to label it as Irish. There is an issue on country-of-origin labelling, and we are up for that discussion. I have had these discussions with the Commission and with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) officials and the DEFRA Minister, because the discussion will happen at EU level. I want to keep distinguishing the local industry from the processors and the people who have been involved in the horse meat scandal.

Mr Allister: In other answers, the Minister indicated that, until this crisis, the practice in recent years was that, at most, there were two inspections of meat plants and four investigations of labelling per annum, but in none of those was there any taking or testing of actual product. How far does the Minister accept that that contributed to enabling horse meat to appear in our meat plants? Has that gap now been plugged?

Mrs O'Neill: The issue is very clear, in that it is either one of gross negligence or criminality. No matter what checks and balances you have in place, if there is a criminal element involved, it will always try to find a way to take forward the actions that it has been involved with. From this instance, it is very clear that there is a criminal element that needs to be exposed. The PSNI needs to be involved in bringing that to the fore and making sure that people are being dealt with appropriately by the law.

FSA is leading the investigations of testing. If those throw up areas that potentially need to be tightened up, I am happy to talk to the agency about them. FSA has been leading the investigations from the start and is continuing them. It is very important that we explore those very fully at European and local level. I am committed to making sure that we work with officials to do that.

Badger Setts: County Down

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the badger sett survey in County Down. (AQO 3761/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) has been commissioned to undertake a badger sett survey in two areas, each of 100 square kilometres, in County Down. These areas were selected on the basis that they have higher badger density, higher cattle-herd density and high confirmed levels of

bovine TB. The first area is between Banbridge and Rathfriland, and the second is near Castlewellan. Letters issued from the Chief Veterinary Officer to farmers in the Banbridge/Rathfriland area on 31 January 2013 invited their participation. Similar letters, issued on 8 March 2013, invited the participation of farmers in the Castlewellan area.

The badger sett survey is an essential preparatory phase of the test and vaccinate or remove (TVR) wildlife intervention research, which involves testing live badgers, vaccinating and releasing the test-negative badgers and removing the test-positive ones. My Department has already received permissions for AFBI to conduct a badger sett survey on 73% of land in the first area and 40% of land in the Castlewellan area. Agreements to allow badger sett surveying continue to be received daily. Reminder letters were issued last Friday to farmers in the Castlewellan area who have yet to respond. I expect that that will lead to a significant increase in the number of permissions given. I encourage those farmers to reply as soon as possible, using the prepaid envelope provided. I also advise that AFBI continues to make good progress on the survey fieldwork in each area.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline when the badger sett survey will be complete? Will she note that some Members may be parochial, but certainly not this one, who is enquiring about County Down? *[Laughter.]*

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his supplementary question, and I am sure that people will be delighted to hear that you are concerned right across the board.

The optimal time to conduct a badger sett survey is during the winter and spring months when the vegetation is low, so, ideally, this will run from November right through to April or May. The current badger sett survey started in mid-February of this year in the Banbridge area and in mid-March in the Castlewellan area. So, depending on the weather and grass growth, we expect this phase of surveying to conclude around mid-May, and farms not surveyed by then can be surveyed next winter.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Karen McKeivitt, who may be parochial.

Mrs McKeivitt: How many farmers volunteered for the scheme in South Down? What outcomes has the scheme achieved so far?

Mrs O'Neill: This is the first phase of our whole TVR approach, and we have had quite a number of responses. In the Banbridge/Rathfriland area, 152 farmers have still to respond, but the number who have come forward is very positive, and we welcome the fact that they are engaging because this is a very difficult issue to deal with.

I do not have the exact figures with me, but I am happy to provide them to the Member. However, I can say that there has been a very positive response right across the board. If any farmer has not responded, I encourage them to do so even now, because we can make sure that their land is surveyed in the next winter period.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister detail the backup plan that, I assume, she has in place if, for whatever reason, individual landowners decide not to grant permission, meaning that partial areas of land will remain throughout those areas on which no survey will be conducted? Does she believe that that could pose a risk to the tests' overall integrity?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, a very high number of farmers have engaged in this. I do not start anything with a defeatist attitude, so I am coming at the matter thinking that this is a very positive way to deal with TB. It commands the highest support in the environmental sector for people's issues and concerns, and I am committed to taking it forward. I am very enthused by the early work that has been done. As I said, a very high number of farmers have come forward and are engaging very positively with the project, which I think will give us enough scope to be able to take forward this very important work.

Rural Crime

3. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the efforts to tackle rural crime. (AQO 3762/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Responsibility for tackling rural crime rests primarily with the PSNI, and I have met the Chief Constable on a number of occasions to make him aware of my concerns about the increasing level of rural crime, including agriculture-related crime. I have also discussed the increase in rural crime with the Minister of Justice.

My Department has been working closely with the police and other enforcement agencies to address the scourge of livestock theft. In 2012, that partnership was evident in a number of joint initiatives with the police on livestock theft, including Farm Watch and the freeze-branding initiative. Furthermore, in December, I launched a Crimestoppers campaign with the Justice Minister, David Ford, that encouraged the rural community to report suspicious activity anonymously. That campaign had the support of the police, other government agencies, the NFU and the UFU.

At an operational level, the Department's central enforcement team is actively working with the police on, for example, conducting roadside vehicle inspections, undertaking joint criminal investigations and, indeed, training constables to identify suspicious consignments of livestock. Cross-border smuggling of livestock, which is sometimes stolen, is a feature of rural crime, and the central enforcement team is working closely with its Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine counterparts and the gardaí. Relationships have been strengthened with joint training and enhanced communication channels. My Department also works closely with the Department of Justice to ensure that rural dwellers' specific needs are taken into account in the development of community safety initiatives.

Mr Beggs: Rural crime has come to the fore, particularly over the past couple of years, with some very high-profile incidents, including the theft of heating oil, lead from the roofs of community facilities and even some overhead and underground community power lines. Is the Minister satisfied that the PSNI and, indeed, her officials, are doing all that is reasonably possible to work with local communities to try to tackle those who are responsible for such heinous crimes?

Mrs O'Neill: I am satisfied that we are holding the discussions that need to be held. I am engaging regularly with the PSNI and directly with Matt Baggott, the Chief Constable, on the approach to be taken. There is a difference between agriculture crime and rural crime, and that has been highlighted consistently over the past number of years. We have seen an increase in livestock theft due to the rurality and isolation of farm stock. However, given the level of crime, particularly in livestock theft, everybody needs to put their shoulder to the wheel.

I am confident that a lot of hard work is taking place, and I am confident that the central

enforcement team in DARD is doing all that it can. However, I think that we can make a difference in tackling rural crime only if we deal with the issue collectively with all the relevant Departments, the police, the gardaí and everybody working together.

Mr Campbell: The Minister said that everybody needs to:

"put their shoulder to the wheel."

However, as she knows, the problem in some rural areas is that thieves are taking the wheels with them. What will she do in rural areas, in co-ordination with the police, to ensure that the rural text scheme, as well as the trailer ID scheme, is expanded and developed to try to combat crime in rural areas?

2.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, a collective effort is needed. My central enforcement team will continue to work with the PSNI. We have made some progress over the past year on initiatives that have been taken forward, particularly around freeze branding. There has been some positive work, but there is always a lot more to do. We have seen a rise in rural crime, so it is an issue that needs to be taken seriously. I am happy to continue to liaise with the PSNI and the Chief Constable to make sure that they are carrying out their role responsibly, and I will make sure that the central enforcement team in the Department will carry out its role responsibly. We will bring forward more of the positive initiatives that we have seen launched over the past number of years.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her response. Can she outline what provisions are in the rural White Paper for the involvement of rural communities in community safety?

Mrs O'Neill: The rural White Paper action plan contains a commitment by the Department of Justice to develop a new community safety strategy, which will ensure that the needs of rural communities are taken into account. The Department of Justice has confirmed that the community safety strategy has now been published, and action plans for each of the eight individual strands of activity detailed in the strategy have been developed and agreed by the Justice Committee. One of the eight strands is around reducing the opportunities for crime and includes measures on supporting

safer rural communities and working in partnership with rural groups to prevent and reduce crime.

Dairy Farming: Milk Quotas

4. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what proposals she is putting in place to sustain and develop the dairy sector given that milk quotas are to be abolished. (AQO 3763/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The dairy sector makes an important contribution to the local agrifood industry. To ensure its future sustainability when milk quotas end in 2015, it is vital that it remains competitive. My Department's overall aim, therefore, is to help the dairy sector to improve its performance and grow its potential in the marketplace. That work has included joint support with Invest NI for an industry-led dairy competitiveness study, the aim of which was to help the sector plan for the future, post milk quotas. The recommendations of the study are now being taken forward by the dairy industry.

I believe that a market-led strategy is vital for the dairy sector because, when milk quotas end, there will be no restraints on production. As a consequence, future decisions on milk production will be taken by the dairy sector in the context of input costs and market returns. Therefore, to help ensure that the industry remains sustainable, my Department, through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and AFBI, will continue to provide education, training, technical support and research to help improve efficiency, competitiveness and innovation. In addition, we will review the range of support measures available to the local agrifood industry, including the dairy sector, under the 2014-2020 rural development programme.

The dairy sector has the potential to grow further and to exploit opportunities arising from the predicted expansion in world population. In that context, I look forward to receipt of the report of the Agri-Food Strategy Board, which the dairy sector has engaged positively with, and which will help shape the future growth of the sector, particularly following the ending of milk quotas.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for that response. What assessment has her Department made of the effects that the CAP reform proposals may have on the dairy sector, the volume of milk produced, the number of

farmers employed and the consequences for the agrifood sector?

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member is aware, the CAP negotiations are ongoing; we are still in the middle of those. Broad principles have been agreed, but we are still working out the detail of the supports that we will be able to provide to the dairy sector under the shaping of the new rural development programme. I am involved in consulting on that at the moment, and I will formally consult on it towards the end of the year.

There are a number of challenges. The ending of milk quotas will present an obvious challenge to the sector, given the importance of the dairy sector to our industry, which produces 32% of gross agrifood output. It is a very important sector in agrifood production. We need to work with the sector, and the opportunity to do that will come through the Agri-Food Strategy Board and the strategy that is produced in the action plan, which will then inform us of the new approach to the new rural development programme and how we provide supports to the industry. As I said, it is a very significant industry that employs over 3,500 people on dairy farms, and it is an industry that we want to continue to support. Although the ending of quotas presents challenges, it will also present some opportunities, and we need to exploit those, particularly in reaching into new and emerging markets.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her answer. It was near enough the same answer that she gave me when I asked that question on 24 September 2012, so not an awful lot has changed. There is a lot of talk of reviews, and the ending of milk quotas is not far away. Minister, you spoke about open markets and the industry being sustainable. Have you had any dealings with Minister Coveney in the Republic of Ireland, where parts of the organisations, especially the Irish Farmers' Association, have actually launched a campaign that only milk that carries the Milk Development Council brand should be bought? That effectively bars milk produced in Northern Ireland from entering the Republic's market.

Mrs O'Neill: I have ongoing discussions with Minister Simon Coveney on a whole range of issues, and that is one of them. We send about 20% of the milk that we produce to the South, so it is an important market for the local dairy sector and how it sells its product.

Instead of competing against each other, we should be competing for the bigger markets.

That is where the opportunities lie. When I talk about emerging markets, we should be competing together for those markets, which I am committed to doing. Arlene Foster, who, as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, looks after the processing sector, has also had discussions about the issue that you raised.

The South wants to raise its production by 50% by 2020. There is now an opportunity for us, with the work of the Agri-Food Strategy Board, to look at how we can also increase our production and how we can work together. The Agri-Food Strategy Board will clearly set out the challenges and how we can tackle them. Let us then shape the new rural development programme to support the identified needs of the industry.

There has been a lot of work and a lot of discussions in the dairy sector recently, particularly on the EU dairy package and the voluntary code of practice, which the industry wants to see implemented as quickly as possible, particularly around the contractual relations. There are opportunities, but instead of competing, we should be looking towards the bigger markets, how we get into them and what markets we can reach. There is potential and a good opportunity there for the dairy sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Alastair Ross is not in his place.

Beragh Flood Relief Scheme

6. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress the Rivers Agency has made in progressing the Beragh flood relief scheme. (AQO 3765/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to be able to inform the Member for West Tyrone that the Rivers Agency continues to make significant progress with the Beragh flood alleviation scheme. The design of the preferred scheme option is being finalised, and agency staff are in regular contact with landowners and affected residents regarding the impact of the scheme on their properties.

The business case has been completed and approved, enabling the procurement process to move forward. Invitations to tender will be publicly advertised in June, and it is envisaged that the contract will be awarded and construction work commenced this autumn. The Rivers Agency has been mindful of the need to keep the local community informed, and a further community meeting is being arranged for May.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer and welcome its detail. Will the Minister state whether all parties are satisfied with the refurbishment that has to take place on the bridge, and when does she hope that the scheme will be completed, given that it is over two years since we had the big flood there?

Mrs O'Neill: The timescale, as I said, is that the business case has been approved and we are now moving towards procurement. We hope to be on the ground and work started by the autumn, with an expected work period of 12 months. So, we hope to be finished by autumn next year. That is ongoing, and I know that the people of Beragh are eager to have the scheme commenced and completed as quickly as possible because I saw at first hand the impact of the flooding in the area, so we will move on with that.

While we are working towards completing the project, the bridge was removed — I assume that you are talking about the railway bridge. I was led to believe that people were content with that because they felt that it was causing an issue with flooding further down, so I am not aware of any issues about the bridge.

Mr Frew: Given the Minister's answers there, and the role that the Rivers Agency has in the Planning Service consultation process, will she put her mind to giving the agency a much more strategic position and deeper input into the Planning Service in order that we are not left with scenarios in future of communities, villages and towns being flooded?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member raises a very good point. There are real issues in that relationship. It has been improved, particularly with the Rivers Agency's new maps and the system that it uses. However, further improvements could be made. A good example of that is where a planner wants to push someone down a field but the Rivers Agency wants to push them up and away from a river. That is a competing demand, and I had discussions with the Rivers Agency on that very issue as recently as last week. I intend to talk to Minister Attwood on how we can improve that situation, because there are competing issues from a planning perspective and the Rivers Agency's perspective, so there are issues that need to be resolved.

Mr Hussey: I agree entirely that tackling the risk to Beragh must remain a priority for the Rivers Agency, but does the Minister agree that the same problem will apply further down the river towards Omagh when the corrective

actions are put into place? I raised that with your officials, at the time, during the meeting in Beragh. Can you tell me whether any targeted study has been conducted to learn what the impact and improvements will be for householders and landowners further downstream?

Mrs O'Neill: When establishing any flood alleviation scheme, all those factors are taken into account, because there is no point in merely moving a flood further downstream for other people to deal with. That does not solve the problem for anybody. All those things will be discussed. However, I am very happy to write to the Member to give him more detail on the progress that has been made further downstream and on any works that are planned there. I can give an assurance that there is no plan or intention to push a problem further down the river for somebody else to deal with.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What is the overall cost of the scheme at Beragh?

Mrs O'Neill: It is estimated that the scheme will cost £1.5 million. As I said, we hope to be on the ground and starting work in early autumn, and it will take about 12 months to complete.

Farmers: Health and Safety

7. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action is being taken to address health and safety issues for farmers over the age of 65. (AQO 3766/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Health and safety is a matter for all farmers and their families, irrespective of age. I am pleased to advise that my Department has joined with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), NIAPA, the NFU Mutual and the Young Farmers' Clubs to form the Farm Safety Partnership. The partnership launched its comprehensive action plan in November 2012. It has made good progress against the plan. The plan will deliver on four key areas: the provision of information and promotion of safe working; health and safety training; motivating good practice and discouraging poor practice; and the collection and analysis of information.

On 25 March 2013, the partnership launched a multimedia campaign. It is hard-hitting and designed to change the attitudes of farmers to risk. It also targets their influencers and family members. The campaign covers TV, radio and news media. Indications are that farmers are

well aware of the risks and of what they should do. It is a matter of changing the mindset to stop and think safe.

My Department plays its part in delivering the farm safety message in a number of ways. Through locally based CAFRE development advisers, information is distributed to farmers attending training events and workshops across the North. The information that is being distributed focuses on slurry mixing, including the dangers from gases, and the safe use of machinery when mixing and spreading.

My Department is also rolling out the FarmSafe Awareness course to 3,000 farmers of all ages across the North. The FarmSafe course covers the four key risk areas on the farms: tractors and machinery; livestock; falls from height; and slurry.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that, according to the figures, the 65-plus age group seems to be most at risk and that whatever can be done to make those farmers more aware will be of benefit?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. That is why I am delighted that we have the action plan in place. It is targeting those who are most vulnerable. We have a lot of farmers in that age bracket, so we need to make sure that we are getting messages out and discouraging the practice of just doing things the way that they have been done for years. Sometimes, you need to think about a new way of doing things and about putting your safety first. The campaign message is clear: stop; think about it; act safely. We will continue to do that and get that message out there strongly. I hope that the Member agrees that the media campaign that we are rolling out is effective and that it is getting that message across to the wider farming community.

Mr Cree: I commend the recent efforts of the Farm Safety Partnership in its media campaign, which was very striking. Can the Minister provide any information as to how her Department regularly liaises with the Health and Safety Executive, so that they look at the near-fatal accidents involving, again, farmers aged 65 and older?

Mrs O'Neill: I can give the Member an assurance that the Department engages regularly with the HSE. It is very important that we do so. It is in the lead on health and safety in general, but my officials are regularly engaged on farming issues in particular. That

is why we have this partnership working, and I think that it is very important that we have it. It is important that we work collectively to ensure the safety of the farming community when it is out doing its work. Farming is a very dangerous profession. It is a very rewarding profession, but the potential risks that it poses for farmers mean that it is a very dangerous profession.

We will continue to work with HSE and our other partners to ensure that we get strong safety messages out there. It is key that we also work with farming unions to ensure that they get messages out to the farming community. We will do more of that in years to come.

3.00 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 13 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Arts: Media Coverage

1. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she has taken to ensure that local arts events and productions receive greater coverage across television and radio. (AQO 3775/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I take every opportunity to promote local arts events across all media platforms. Therefore, I am engaged in a series of meetings to attempt to influence the commissioning of more locally-made programmes, to ensure more local cultural coverage and to discuss where opportunities for local companies might be improved. I have already met BBC, UTV and Ofcom. I will meet RTÉ, TG4, Channel 4 and Channel 5. The Arts Council and NI Screen continue to advocate to local and regional broadcasters the importance of increasing the amount of arts coverage that is available and, in so doing, covering the positive impact that our arts have on our society and, indeed, our economy.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for her answer. What type of tax incentives could be used to promote film and TV production in Northern Ireland? Has the Minister had any discussions with the UK Government on that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am waiting to have a meeting with a Minister from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in England. My Department is

working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest NI on vouchers. Certainly, we need to ensure that, first of all, companies, particularly television companies, that have responsibility for local commissioning look directly at what we have to offer here rather than at the cost-effectiveness of a certain proposal. Unless we take a collaborative approach, local television and film producers will be constantly on the outside looking in. They see people from other places availing themselves of opportunities here. However, it appears that they cannot do the same to best effect. Therefore, as well as trying to talk to a culture Minister in England, I have, as I outlined, pulled together a series of meetings with television companies to try to ensure that people who are involved in the creative industries here get the best possible opportunities. I am not convinced that they do at present.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a cuid freagraí. Does the Minister agree that we have managed to increase the amount of drama that is produced by the BBC in Northern Ireland? Would she also agree that it is now time for UTV to step up to the mark, considering the fact that it has not produced any home-grown drama for many a long year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I acknowledge the sentiment in Dominic Bradley's question. As licence fee payers, we expect some return for our licence fees. However, that is not to say that UTV and other companies could not do a lot better. They need to step up to the mark. I think that they are committed. I have had very good discussions with UTV. I think that it is very sympathetic. Not only is it sympathetic, but it is open to ways of trying to ensure that local artists and film and television producers have a better chance. In, probably, our third meeting, we will start to look at what that detail may look like. I agree that people here need to be given better opportunities in television and film production. It is up to me to ensure that I fight their corner. I am doing that.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. Will culture, arts and music be televised as part of the City of Culture and the World Police and Fire Games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The answer is yes. I do not know whether the Member saw 'Lesser Spotted Culture' recently, which has continued to

provide a good overview of the City of Culture. Indeed, other television and film companies are interested in what we have to offer in 2013.

I recently hosted a meeting with Mike Graham, who is the president of the World Police and Fire Games Federation, and the World Police and Fire Games company. We briefed the media on our programme and also on what we would like to see with the coverage. Coverage is at the discretion of local media, but we offered a good insight into the possibilities and potential by highlighting what I think will be a wonderful opportunity between 1 and 10 August this year.

Creative Industries: East Londonderry

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support her Department has given to the creative industries sector in East Londonderry over the last three years. (AQO 3776/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Over the past three years, my Department has provided funding through the Arts Council of more than £750,000 in support of the creative sector in the East Derry constituency. That includes support for three companies through the creative industries innovation fund in areas such as digital media, publishing and cultural tourism. The work of NI Screen in attracting major film and television productions to the North has resulted in the internationally acclaimed 'Game of Thrones' being shot on Downhill beach. That provides a global showcase for the north coast and East Derry as a film, production and tourist location.

Mr Campbell: The Minister referred to £750,000, which is obviously a welcome spend, and she mentioned Downhill beach. Given that the whole stretch of coastline features some of the most majestic and beautiful scenery in western Europe, does the Minister agree that it would make a natural backdrop for many of the creative industries and that more could be done to promote it as a filming location?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly do agree. Having seen some of the landscape that the Member referred to, I can say that it is an excellent location. I think that local government in those areas needs to step up a bit more, to be quite frank. It is no coincidence that local government in Derry and Belfast have received more funding than others from the creative industries innovation fund. Even during the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's inquiry, an uneven distribution or an uneven success rate was highlighted around that fund.

I want that to change. It is not just about relying on a single source of funding but about capitalising on other opportunities through tourism. I certainly think that the Member's constituency is one of the prime locations. I am keen to hear any of the Member's suggestions. I do not want regional disparities around opportunities; we have had too many decades of that. We need to ensure that we try to spread the opportunities across the North.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister consider other ways of expanding the creative industries innovation fund, and does she see the RPA as an opportunity for local government to do that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I always think that there is an opportunity to expand a fund, and I am keen to ensure that that fund is expanded. It has been very successful and plays an important role in innovation for people whose applications are successful. If the RPA is an opportunity, I am sure that there are many others. I want a coming together through NILGA, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers or both, probably with companies such as Digital Circle in Derry and others to try to give advice and provide expertise and guidance about how to be more successful with applications to the creative industries innovation fund. I have absolutely no doubt that there are people across the North who are creative, entrepreneurial, work in the community and voluntary sector and have loads of good ideas but just do not know how to articulate them through a successful funding application. Indeed, officials from my Department are more than willing to talk to people about how they could expand their opportunities. The Arts Council will be happy to do so as well.

Mrs Overend: Following a recent meeting with our councillors in the East Londonderry area, I know that that is a particular interest to the creative industries. Will the Minister outline what action has been taken to upskill the workforce in pre-production techniques to take full advantage of the opportunities being presented, for example, by 'Game of Thrones'?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will know that NI Screen's education and outreach programme has been very successful in getting young people excited about the creative industries by letting them see not just the 'Game of Thrones' set but the crafts, skills and expertise involved. A lot of them have been surprised by the different opportunities in local television and film production. As part of the work experience

programme through schools and colleges, they can also go on-site and work with companies.

I know that the Nerve Centre, the AmmA Centre, the Ashton Centre and others are involved in outreach, particularly with the creative hubs. We recently looked at ways in which we can try to maximise opportunities to make sure that there is upskilling. A very small example is that shirt factory workers in Derry are now involved in providing the wardrobe for 'Game of Thrones'. People who were involved in hair and beauty and found themselves unemployed are now going into theatre production to try to enhance their skills and opportunities.

There are many opportunities, but I think that the Member's point is that those need to be spread out and that everybody needs to know what they are. I will offer the Member the same advice that I gave to my colleague in a previous answer: if your councillors or a group of people in your area want to know what those additional skills are, they should contact us, through the Arts Council or my Department, and we will be happy for people to go out to see what else we can do.

Mr Byrne: At this stage, I extend my generosity to East Derry, as Barry McElduff did earlier to South Down.

What proposals does the Department have to help the creative industries in further education colleges? North West Regional College's Limavady campus has a very good track record in art and design, and I think that there could be some benefit from investing in some of the projects that those colleges engage in.

Ms Ní Chuilín: We all need to link and make connections with further education colleges and the community and voluntary sector, but I am not putting my money into further education colleges when that is the Minister for Employment and Learning's responsibility. However, I am certainly trying to make sure that those connections are made. If investment is needed to make those connections, I am happy to look at that, but I am certainly not happy to fund gaps in anybody's budget if they have added in young people as an afterthought rather than doing that upfront.

Athletics: Indoor Training Facility

3. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she will meet with Athletics Northern Ireland to discuss the potential

development of a dedicated indoor athletics training facility. (AQO 3777/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Discussions on the potential development of a dedicated indoor athletics training facility can and will be taken forward only in the context of a clear, co-ordinated strategy for the sport, mainly developed by the governing body, Athletics NI. I previously said to the Member that I would consider a future bid for capital funding should Athletics NI produce a suitable proposal that would contribute to the delivery of the targets in the Sport Matters strategy and my wider priorities of promoting social and economic equality and tackling social exclusion and poverty. To that end, I have asked my officials, along with Sport NI, to meet Athletics NI in order to open up discussions on the potential and the need for a dedicated indoor training facility.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for her answer because, after contacting her office by e-mail and letter, I have, to date, received no response to my requests for a meeting. It is my understanding that Athletics NI also contacted the Department and received no response. I welcome that progress will potentially be made. Is there a greater opportunity to access capital funding given that the likes of capital projects such as the A5 are not advancing as planned?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As far as I am concerned, the A5 is going ahead; I have not been told that it is not. If the Member has information that it is not, I think that he should share that with the House.

There is certainly no excuse for my Department's bad manners, so I apologise for that. At the very least, you should have been given an acknowledgement, if not an explanation for why a meeting was not going ahead. There is absolutely no excuse for Athletics NI not getting a response either. The Member can be assured that I will go back and find out what is happening.

I asked officials to meet Athletics NI to see whether there was the potential for such a development and to start discussions. The process will be lengthy because I will have to bid for funding, but we will try to get it done in this side of the mandate in order to get some security on what indoor facility there might be, based on a business case. All I can do is apologise again to the Member for his not getting any response.

3.15 pm

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her response. I am surprised that, following last year's very successful Olympics, there is no strategic plan for the development of indoor training facilities, which I believe is necessary. Can the Minister give us any time frame during which we will see positive action to put such facilities on the ground so that people can benefit from them before the next Olympics? I suggest that North Down might be a suitable venue.

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the first instance, the business case and the proposal need to come from the governing body, which is Athletics NI. Regardless of what should or should not have happened, that process is going to start now. I am sure that every Member could jump up on their feet and do what you just did, which was to suggest that it could happen in such and such a place. The fact is that it is really down to Athletics NI to come forward with a proposal. Where that potential venue will be is probably for another day's Question Time.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she consider wider discussions over and beyond Athletics Northern Ireland so that you can take in educational establishments, the universities, schools, and so forth, so that a better basis can be provided for making a decision on an indoor arena?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The answer is yes. In the first instance, however, any additional support for Athletics NI needs to come with a strong business case. Further education, education and local government are all involved in the Sport Matters strategy and the Sport Matters implementation group. That has been a very good and positive experience. Despite all the needs out there and the rationale that we all want to try to future-proof — the assumption being that more children, young people and older people will get involved in sport and physical activity — and that you want to get the best, there is a realisation that the public purse just is not there. That is not to say that the facilities are not needed. A more joined-up approach is definitely needed. I have had discussions, albeit brief, with Athletics NI, and it is more than aware that that is needed. It would welcome more people coming on board to give it support. It also wants to make sure that our children and young people have every opportunity to compete with the best.

Ms Lo: I hope, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you will forgive me if I widen the question a little bit. What progress has the Minister made in developing walking trails in the outdoor activities strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: A lot of the sports providers include walking trails. The most recent one that I saw was a huge outdoor walking trail in the Mid Ulster Sports Arena in the Mid Ulster constituency just outside Cookstown. DARD was heavily involved in that. There are opportunities coming up, even through the stadia development and the programmes in that. If you are looking at what else you can do for communities, you could look at outdoor walking trails. That is a park-run scheme, and the parks that have been involved have included walking trails. I participated in the trail in north Belfast, but certainly not in the running. I will just have that on the record.

Mr McDevitt: Go on.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am too old. Certainly, the walks —

Mr McDevitt: You are not too old.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am too old, Conall. I will be honest about it. I enjoy the walks. Other people, particularly those in rural areas, should have those opportunities. A lot of rural communities do not even have footpaths to walk on. They need to have access to physical activity, training and running if they wish. We are looking at future building, trying to have that future-proofed and trying to build in those things while the developments are happening, rather than to have them as an afterthought.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It was very good of Ms Lo to warn me that she was widening the question, but I encourage Members to try to stay as close to the question on the page as possible.

Soccer: Sectarianism

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what measures are being put in place to help curb sectarianism in local soccer. (AQO 3778/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: First, I congratulate Cliftonville Football Club on its winning the Irish league. I am sure that the House will join me in that. Commiserations to Linfield. The big two are now in North Belfast, so that is something to be proud of.

The Irish Football Association (IFA) oversees local soccer and is responsible for putting in place measures to help to curb sectarianism in the game where it arises. I am aware that the IFA already runs a very successful Football for All campaign, which seeks to promote an

inclusive culture throughout the game and challenge any forms of prejudice, such as sectarianism, in the sport. I fully endorse the Football for All campaign. It is entirely consistent with the aims of my Department's strategy for sport, which seeks to promote community cohesion, good relations and integration. Furthermore, as part of the delivery of Sport Matters, DCAL, with the support of the IFA, assisted the Department of Justice in introducing Part 4 of the Justice Act. That legislation incorporates a number of provisions to help combat sectarianism at regulated football matches. It also includes offences that relate to sectarian chanting and the stirring up of sectarian hatred by those who attend games.

However, I am concerned that, despite the good work of the IFA and the implementation of those measures, there remain perceptions that sectarianism continues to be a problem, particularly in local soccer. I, therefore, intend to commission research into sectarianism in soccer to help establish what else, if anything, needs to be done.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Has the Minister or her Department done anything specific to curb sectarianism in local soccer?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have supported events that Mr Michael Boyd has run with the IFA. I have also criticised sectarianism in a very public way and condemned it across the board, regardless of where it emanates from. I do not think that it is acceptable to comment only on certain games. When it happens, it needs to be condemned and challenged. However, there are challenges. That is why I am looking at conducting research to look at this issue specifically and to try to give the IFA another form of support. The IFA can do only so much, and it is down to the clubs and the wider community to do their best to try to challenge sectarianism. I know that it is problematic, and it is certainly challenging. We need to look at new ways to open up the discussion. I do not think that anyone in the House would not condemn sectarianism, and certainly not in sport. It needs to be given the boot.

Mr Humphrey: I agree with the Minister's comment on the actions that have been taken by the IFA, and I congratulate it on its work.

As a Member for North Belfast, I congratulate Cliftonville Football Club and Tommy Breslin and his team on winning the Irish League on

Saturday. However, as a Blues man, I have to say that it was a pity about the result.

Will the Minister join with me in condemning those Cliftonville supporters who mocked Baroness Thatcher's passing before the game on Saturday by carrying a coffin draped in a black flag with a witch's hat on it up the Cliftonville Road, singing offensive songs and using offensive and gratuitous language about her? Such behaviour is not acceptable in any Irish League ground.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Humphrey: Such behaviour should not be tolerated by society. Will the Minister join with me in condemning it? Does she agree that Cliftonville Football Club needs to distance itself from such behaviour?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I condemn any sectarian incident. I have not seen the YouTube footage that his colleague referred to in the 'Irish News' today, but I will look at it. However, I asked people who were there, and they said that Cliftonville fans were not involved. Had that activity occurred in Cliftonville's ground, we would be having a different conversation, but it did not. In fairness to Cliftonville Football Club, it needs to be given the flexibility and space to make remarks about this.

Regardless of how people feel about Maggie Thatcher — I have my own feelings — and regardless of her legacy on this island, which was not good, and the fact that she is a divisive character even in her own country, I do not think that it is befitting of people to follow in the footsteps of someone who brought nothing but misery, humiliation and degradation to this country. It is undignified, and I would not encourage anyone to become involved in that activity.

Mr Elliott: I also join in the congratulations for Cliftonville Football Club. I would have preferred Ballinamallard United to have won the league, but I am quite happy to congratulate Cliftonville. I obviously wish the club well for the future, but I hope that it does not win the league again too soon.

I want to follow up on the previous question. I think that Mr Humphrey's question was whether the Minister condemns that activity. I agree with the Minister that Cliftonville Football Club should be given the space and opportunity to say its bit, and I am sure that its management will do that, but will the Minister take action, if it

is deemed necessary following the incidents that took place on Saturday after that match, in relation to cutting out totally this type of behaviour from football and, indeed, sport in general?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am taking action. I am looking at bringing forward a report and a piece of work to challenge sectarianism in soccer. Taking action about sectarian behaviour around soccer, football matches or any other matches is solely down to the PSNI. The legislation is there to do that. Do I condemn sectarianism? Absolutely. Do I think that it is wrong? Absolutely. Do I think that it is ugly? I totally do. Am I going to condone the behaviour of people who act in a way that is not dignified around soccer matches and behave in a sectarian way? I am absolutely not going to do that. However, to link the incident with the coffin to Cliftonville's success is, I think, wrong. People are making connections here where there is none to make. Cliftonville Football Club needs to be given the space and flexibility to make whatever statement it feels is appropriate.

Anybody who is serious about condemning and challenging sectarianism needs to do it with a genuine heart, and not use places such as this to make it easy for people to be sectarian outside.

Cycling: Giro d'Italia 2014

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr McDevitt for a question.

Mr McDevitt: In the spirit of the question: numero cinque.

5. **Mr McDevitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she intends to maximise the opportunity to promote cycling afforded by the Grande Partenza (Big Start) of the Giro d'Italia 2014. (AQO 3779/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of the recent announcement that — if I pronounce it right — the Grande Partenza of the Giro d'Italia will take place in the North of Ireland in 2014. This will be a welcome return to Ireland for one of cycling's Grand Tour events, the Tour de France having visited these shores in 1998. Primary responsibility for maximising the opportunity to promote cycling arising from this event rests, in the first instance, as the Member knows, with the governing body, Cycling Ireland. That having been said, my Department remains interested in working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Tourist Board (NITB) to see

how 2014 can best be used to promote sport, and particularly that cycling event. To that end, DCAL has recently accepted an invitation from NITB to sit on the board's steering committee that will be responsible for overseeing the delivery and organisation of this event. In addition, I believe that the fact that the Giro d'Italia is coming to Ireland in 2014 provides a much needed opportunity to promote even greater North/South co-operation in a range of areas, particularly sport.

Mr McDevitt: As the Minister said, the Grande Partenza of the Giro d'Italia is certainly a big deal. It is huge for us here in Northern Ireland and across Ireland. Can the Minister give us some sense of where we might hope to see the cyclists visit during their two or three days north of the border before they head south to Dublin?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is premature for me to say what those will be, because the Department has not had any meetings yet. I agree with the Member, though, that we need to exploit every opportunity here in the North. I am sure that, with the guidance of Cycling Ireland in the first instance, we will. It needs to direct us where those places might be. I know that from the recent success of Marty Irvine and many others, and even from the Olympics, interest in cycling has increased, and that is a good thing. Certainly, in tourist potential, my Department, along with DETI, Invest NI, the Tourist Board and Cycling Ireland will be looking at opportunities here before the event goes south.

Mr Milne: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What is the likelihood for further funding for cycling in the years ahead?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I mentioned Cycling Ireland in answer to Conall McDevitt, and we are working with it to look at and consider a bid under the performance focus programme. Further funding around that programme is targeted at achieving athletic performance in the first instance, but any funding provided to Cycling Ireland under the programme would be aimed at improving not only athletics performance but athletes in general, through cycling, across the North. Sport NI recently commissioned a consultant to develop a high-performance and talent strategy for Cycling Ireland. It will be making a decision on this in due course, I think probably around the end of May or beginning of June, when the high-performance and talent strategy is due to be completed. However, I am certainly committed to trying to find additional money for Cycling Ireland.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Suicide Prevention

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the significant rise in suicide rates in Northern Ireland over the last 15 years; and calls on the Executive to prioritise suicide prevention strategies. — [Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety).]

Mr G Robinson: First and foremost, I extend my sincere sympathies to Kieran McCarthy on his family's great loss to suicide.

I speak in the debate with great respect for the families who have lost members in the tragic circumstances that the debate covers. All Members, including me, have constituents who have been affected and who wish to see maximum effort expended to prevent further tragedies.

We must never lose sight of the fact that numbers and statistics about suicide all come down to one thing: people. They are real people who are cherished by their families but who, for whatever reason, take this tragic course of action that leaves devastation in its wake. We must also acknowledge that some cases cannot be attributed to a specific incident or prevailing circumstances.

I also take the opportunity to echo the plea of the Health Minister during the recent severe weather to anyone who has been severely affected by the prevailing conditions to seek help if they feel that they cannot cope. As everyone understands, current circumstances are extreme and have deeply traumatic effects on some individuals.

We would all welcome any move that would reduce the rate of suicide. The Minister is committed to that reduction. On Tuesday 26 June 2012, the Minister stated:

"Tackling suicide in our society remains a priority ... and I am fully committed to continually seeking ways of reducing this tragic loss of life."

The words are clear, strong and, for me, very welcome. The more we understand of the reasons for suicide, the better we can prevent

the ultimate tragic act. I take this opportunity to appeal to anyone who has suicidal tendencies to speak to someone about their concerns. There are great organisations that do sterling work in suicide prevention.

In that statement, the Minister also acknowledged how the refreshed Protect Life suicide prevention strategy set a new aim to reduce the differential in the suicide rate between deprived and non-deprived areas, particularly for males in the 15-to-45 age group. Those groups seem to be more prone to taking drastic action, and identifying them and addressing their concerns has real potential to see the annual total of lives lost reduced.

I note that criticism has been made of the Protect Life strategy, but I understand that there is verbal evidence that, due to that strategy, people have been prevented from taking that last tragic step. I believe that those accounts are successes. It must be highlighted that, since 2006, figures have remained generally level, but I agree that more still needs to be done, as they are still unacceptably high in Northern Ireland.

I also noted that there is an emphasis on greater interdepartmental co-operation and that the Minister was struck by my colleagues' willingness to be involved. That cross-party and interdepartmental approach is essential and very welcome in tackling the rate of suicide in Northern Ireland. The £3 million wasted each year on hoax calls to the emergency services could fund an excellent programme of prevention. Perhaps those who make such calls should remember that that money could be better spent on suicide awareness programmes.

I want to see the suicide rate in Northern Ireland fall, and I will support effective measures to ensure that that happens. We must remember that our neighbouring countries are seeing a fall in numbers. I also believe that the Minister shares my outlook, and I am, therefore, pleased to support this worthwhile motion.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the motion from the Health Committee. I am not a member of the Committee, but it is important for me to make some contribution.

Suicide and self-harm are among the most prevalent public health concerns to come to the fore, particularly in the last 10 years. We must ensure that our public services are in the best position to address and prevent them and to provide proper, professional, community-based

support for those who have attempted suicide, have self-harmed or have suicidal thoughts.

From 150 deaths in 1998, rising consistently to 313 deaths in 2010, in our communities, throughout front line health services and in the media, we are more aware of suicide and the impact that it has on a family, a street and a community. I vividly recall watching the news some years ago about the horror of growing suicide rates among young people in rural Wales and the devastation that that brought there. We have to address suicide in the round. Prevention, in my opinion, is the key to stemming the tide of suicide in our society. When we hear that between 2005 and 2009 almost one third of deaths among those between the ages of 15 and 34 were attributed to suicide, we begin to scratch the surface of an issue that is still, unfortunately, a taboo subject in so many of our communities.

We should commend the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the PHA in particular for the work on the creation of the Protect Life strategy. The revised action plan from the summer of last year focuses on the local dimension to addressing suicide through education, counselling and support services. As I have said when we have debated this strategy in the past, a number of organisations in my constituency are simply world-class in the delivery of those services. I want to name some of those organisations in the Derry City Council area: Aware Defeat Depression, HURT and Foyle Search and Rescue. There are many more to mention.

Foyle Search and Rescue, in particular, has been phenomenal in its direct and indirect support in dealing with suicide in Derry. Formed 19 years ago as a community reaction to an 18-month period in Derry when 36 lives were lost in the river Foyle, many through suicide, the charity was set up with the aim of saving life in and around the river Foyle. Members may recall a documentary on the BBC recording the charity's work in the December period of last year. The organisation works with community and statutory agencies to deliver counselling, education and direct intervention around the river Foyle. I am confident in saying that the balance in how it conducts its work has proven the most successful. It has become a mark of excellence in the delivery of those vital services.

In calling on the Executive to prioritise suicide prevention strategies, the most practical call I make to Ministers is to listen and learn. Go out into the community and see what organisations — many of them are charities — are doing in

this area. In the Civil Service and throughout the public service, we are often so entrenched in our ways that, unfortunately, we do things a certain way, conform to policies and are protective of them. All life is precious. As such, we should do all that we can to replicate support and finance the organisations that are a model of good practice on the ground. The Public Health Agency alone cannot do all that needs to be done, especially in rural areas, where we need to be mindful that, often, only piecemeal services are in place. Key support services are available mainly in urban settings. That is something that we must address and the Executive must prioritise.

It is important to put on record the support that we should give to services and strategies that support those who self-harm or who have self-harmed in the past. Between 2005 and 2009, 23,500 admissions to hospital were as a result of self-harm. This is another growing problem that we cannot afford to ignore. I want to reference the Protect Life strategy and its aims in that regard. I will single out one worrying quote on self-harm from the report.

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

Mr P Ramsey:

"it is important to note that the DSH Registry has highlighted that approximately 40% of hospital attendances do not result in admissions and therefore the reported self-harm figures substantially underestimate the true size of the problem."

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

Mr Wells: First, I apologise profusely that I was not here for the start of the debate. Unfortunately, I got my timings wrong. I looked at the busy schedule of business and assumed that the debate would be held after Question Time. I am particularly disappointed that I missed not only the Chair's contribution but that of the Member for Strangford Mr Kieran McCarthy, which, I understand, was very powerful and personal. I will take the first opportunity to read it in Hansard as soon as possible.

We are dealing with a desperately serious issue, incidences of which are becoming worryingly more frequent. As the honourable Member for Foyle said, the number of suicides in our Province has more than doubled in a very short period, up to 313 in 2010. I understand that, when the figures for 2011 and 2012

become available, they will, unfortunately, make fairly grim reading.

I had the privilege of going to Dungannon recently, where I met representatives of the Niamh Louise Foundation, which is doing marvellous work in the Armagh and Tyrone area dealing with suicide prevention. They handed me a little booklet called 'The Last Taboo'. Although one of the staff said that I would probably not get time to read it, I certainly did. The booklet tells very personal stories of those who have committed suicide and those who have been left behind. One of the booklet's major themes is the endless questioning of close relatives as to why someone who perhaps had all to live for should decide to end their life. There is no common theme. Many of these people appeared outwardly to be extremely successful, healthy and fit. Some young people were clearly extremely popular with members of the opposite sex and had no problems getting boyfriends or girlfriends. They seemed to be the life and soul of the party, and yet, sadly and tragically, they decided to take their own life.

It is absolutely incumbent on the Health Department and the social services to get to grips with the reasons why we have this huge upsurge not only in the number of people who commit suicide but in the number who attempt to do so. There are some trends, and areas such as north and west Belfast have huge problems with the issue. It is a problem among young people, but other factors do not seem to be present. Some of the people who are mentioned in 'The Last Taboo' did not have alcohol dependency problems, nor did they take illicit drugs or anything like that. There just does not seem to be a common trend.

We need to identify very clearly what is happening. There must be something terribly wrong in Northern Ireland when our suicide rate is rising while that in other Western societies is falling. It cannot be entirely explained by economics or by the recession because, again, some of the folk whom I learned about through attending the Niamh Louise Foundation meeting and others were successful, were in good employment and had strong family ties, and there was no obvious shortage of money. So, we cannot have quick-fix solutions for what is going on, but we clearly need to do more as a society.

For every one of the people mentioned in 'The Last Taboo' and for every one of the 313 people who died in 2010, there is a family who are grieving intensely. It is one thing to lose a son or a daughter through, perhaps, a traffic

accident or a long-term medical condition, when at least you know why what happened did; it is totally different when a loved one walks out the door and you get the dreaded phone call to say that they have committed the ultimate act and have ended their own life.

There have been quite a few dreadful situations in my constituency of South Down where people have taken their own life. To this day, sometimes 20 or 30 years later, their relatives are still trying frantically to work out what went wrong and what triggered it. Of course, at that time, two or three decades ago, there was not a high level of support.

I know that the Department takes the issue very seriously and is working hard to intervene early to give people the opportunity, when things are getting on top of them, to seek help and to give medical help to those who have suicidal tendencies. However, we must begin to take the issue even more seriously because it is getting out of hand and becoming extremely worrying. Were there any other situation in Northern Ireland in which we were losing 300 people a year, we would quite rightly be worried. We have had huge success in reducing the number of road accidents —

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

Mr Wells: — and yet, while that has been going on, we now lose far more people to suicide.

3.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: There are literally two minutes of the allocated time left. Chris Lyttle, you have two minutes.

Mr Lyttle: It is clear from the debate that there is still much work to be done to improve the mental health of people across Northern Ireland, both in the resources that we are able to allocate to it and the attitudinal change that is needed in the community so that people who feel that they need to discuss their mental health are given the freedom and confidence to do so.

I take this opportunity, in the brief time that I have to speak, to offer my sympathy and support to everyone affected by suicide in Northern Ireland. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I offer sympathy and support to the wider O'Prey family. I pay particular tribute to my colleague Kieran McCarthy MLA for the courage that he showed in speaking about this today. I have learned a huge amount from

Kieran McCarthy in my short time as an MLA, and I know that he will be a sterling and ongoing advocate on the issue.

I also pay tribute to the volunteers and health professionals who work tirelessly to help families affected by suicide and to deliver the adequate resources that we need to prevent this tragedy from affecting others. Mental ill health and suicide can affect absolutely everyone, as MLAs have said today. It requires every Minister in our Executive and every MLA to work together to deliver adequate services in response. I am proud that, in east Belfast, parties have worked on a cross-party basis on the issue. Although I do not agree with every position that the Minister of Health takes, I recognise the effort that he has made to listen to the concerns of organisations such as Survivors of Suicide in order to tackle the issue in east Belfast, which, I understand, had the second highest rate in all of Northern Ireland in 2010. I also thank the Chair of the Health Committee for meeting groups in east Belfast under the facilitation of the East Belfast Community Development Agency —

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

Mr Lyttle: — which is working hard to devise a suicide community response plan in the constituency.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank everyone who has spoken in what has been a thoughtful and useful debate on this very sensitive issue. I pay tribute to Mr McCarthy for speaking when his emotions are very raw. I assure him that the thoughts and prayers of many in the House will be with him and the O'Prey family over the coming months. As I was telling Mr McCarthy, other families have suffered similar bereavements, some of more distant relations and some of very close relations. That is reflective of a community, just as the House reflects a community in which people have various problems, ailments, illnesses and sicknesses associated with their family. Tragically, suicide has affected a number of Members, and that is the case across our community.

Suicide remains one of the biggest public health and societal challenges that we face in Northern Ireland. The provisional figures for registered deaths by suicide for 2012 show that the rates remain far too high, with some 278 deaths recorded last year. That is a modest decrease on the number of deaths registered in the previous year and a more significant

decrease on the record high of deaths in 2010, which stood at 315. The Protect Life suicide prevention strategy, published in late 2006, was developed in response to local concerns about increasing numbers of deaths by suicide. Over the earlier part of the past decade, there was an average of 150 deaths by suicide each year. By 2006, the annual number of registered deaths had virtually doubled. The rate of increase in recorded suicides over 2005 and 2006 was unprecedented. The length of time that it takes to investigate and register a death by suicide means that most of those recorded deaths actually occurred in 2003 and 2004, which coincides with the time when local communities were raising concerns about the increase in suicide in their midst. Clearly, something happened over 2003 and 2004 because the increases in suicide have been sustained since then.

The Department has looked for reasons for the sharp increases in suicide over that period. However, there is no obvious explanation. The increase in recorded suicides follows a comprehensive reorganisation of the Coroners Service and the introduction of more robust recording processes. However, I believe that that may only partially explain the increase.

Regardless of the reasons, Northern Ireland experienced an upward trend in suicide over the past 10 years while neighbouring jurisdictions experienced downward trends. It may be that there was under-recording prior to 2005, and the fact that rates have plateaued at around 280 deaths annually since 2006 supports that view. However, that simply means that we have had a much higher suicide rate than England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland for some time. There may be some post-traumatic stress-related issues from the Troubles that mean that Northern Ireland has a higher rate of suicide than anywhere else. Those things would bear further examination.

Does the continued high rate of suicide here mean that the Protect Life strategy has failed? At its inception, the strategy aimed to reduce the suicide rate to around 11 deaths per 100,000 of population. However, the current rate is 16 per 100,000 of population. So, we have clearly not met the targets that we set ourselves. I deeply regret that we have not had that decrease, but it is not fair to say that that is down to the strategy failing. Indeed, a substantial number of lives have been saved through the efforts of those working on suicide prevention under Protect Life. Although we cannot put a figure on that, we have testimonies from many people who have been helped and

who have stated that, without such intervention, they would not be alive today.

It is also worth noting that Protect Life was launched at the onset of a sharp upward trend in suicide rates. International evidence indicates that it takes many years to reverse such a trend. Evidence also indicates that economic recession tends to be accompanied by increased national suicide rates. That is now being seen in England and the Republic of Ireland, where sustained downward trends have recently been reversed. The fact that the rate here has been steady since 2006 and has not increased in the teeth of a recession may be some indication that the prevention efforts are having a positive impact. However, I cannot emphasise it strongly enough that the level of suicide in Northern Ireland is unacceptably high. Therefore, there can be no grounds for complacency.

In judging the impact of Protect Life, we have to look beyond the overall suicide rate, although we must always bear it in mind that the long-term aim is to reduce it by as much as possible. Independent evaluation of Protect Life was completed last year, and the evaluation report is available on the Department's website. The evaluation found that there has been very strong community engagement in suicide prevention, a reduction in stigma and greater awareness of suicide and of the need to encourage help-seeking behaviour. That provides some evidence that we are doing the right things. The evaluation also found that the least progress had been made in areas that require wider cross-departmental collaboration and engagement, which is the very crux of the motion that we have been debating today. It has highlighted the importance of a broad range of action across government and across sectors.

I have repeatedly said that suicide cannot be addressed by the Health Department alone: it is a societal issue that requires the engagement of nearly all the Departments. I have met on numerous occasions with my ministerial colleagues to explore how we can do more to tackle suicide. I also agreed that, following publication of the refreshed Protect Life document, the ministerial co-ordination group on suicide prevention should meet on a more regular basis. Previously, the group met on an ad hoc arrangement to address specific issues as they arose. Following the publication of the refreshed Protect Life strategy, the ministerial co-ordination group met in June 2012 and again in January this year. We are scheduled to meet again later this year. The membership of the group has been broadened and now includes

all Departments except for Finance and Personnel; Environment; and Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The remit of the group has been revised to cover a broader range of activities to promote positive mental health. That is appropriate because most Departments can influence upstream factors that increase the risk of suicide. Rather than being engaged in delivering the front line crisis response services that are required when a person is actually suicidal, all member Departments now report to the group on progress that they have made on programmes to improve mental health and reduce suicide.

At the last meeting of the ministerial group, I was impressed by the range of activity being undertaken. The Department of Education, for example, is rolling out its emotional health and well-being programme in post-primary schools. The Department for Social Development is funding projects that directly impact on suicide prevention and mental health through the neighbourhood renewal programme, and the Department for Employment and Learning is ensuring that front line staff receive relevant training. The Department of Justice faces particular challenges in the prison population and provides a listener scheme in staff training. It also works with groups such as PIPS to encourage prisoners to spot the signs of emotional distress and to seek help. For its part, OFMDFM has committed to the creation of a support advocacy service to assist victims and survivors of abuse. I recently launched a joint initiative with the Ministers with responsibility for agriculture and sport to promote mental health awareness and help-seeking behaviour through rural networks and sporting organisations. That initiative also involves the provision of training for sports coaches on suicide awareness so that they can spot the signs, intervene appropriately and signpost to further resources of help.

We need to understand more about what is driving the high suicide rate in Northern Ireland. Some of the research funded under Protect Life will help to improve our understanding. High levels of deprivation and mental illness, the effect of societal change on family life, alcohol and substance abuse, serious adverse incidents in early years, the aftermath of the Troubles and physical, emotional and sexual abuse all contribute. In addition, Northern Ireland has a unique experience of 40 years of conflict. Research shows that a legacy of the conflict is high levels of untreated post-traumatic stress disorder. People who were children during the Troubles are now moving into middle age and are the group at greatest risk of suicide. That is particularly true for men

and even more so for men living in deprived areas, which are the very areas that experienced the worst of the violence. The more we understand the underlying driving forces for suicide here, the better informed our response will be right across government. It is too big an issue for this Department or myself, and we all have to work together. There is no magic solution. If there were, we would have used it by now. We all need to work together to identify incremental improvements, make that difference and continue to drive down year on year the number of people who take their own life.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity not only to move the motion but to wind up on the debate. I commend all the Members who took part and listened. It is not only important that it is cross-departmental, but it is about our involvement as MLAs and how we bring it to our Committee. I am delighted that the motion has been supported right across the Chamber.

In a personal capacity and as Chair of the Health Committee — Kieran is a member of our Committee — I take this opportunity to extend my thoughts and sympathy not only to you, Kieran, but to your family on your recent loss. I did not want to say anything at the opening of the debate because it is your personal circumstances, but I hope that you understood that I was thinking about you during the debate from the general comments. I know that you understand that.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. I take this opportunity to thank everyone from the Speaker, the Minister and all my colleagues on behalf of Angela and Cara, Hugh's mother, and their family. Thank you all very much indeed.

4.00 pm

Ms S Ramsey: Thank you. Again, I take this opportunity to send out a clear message that we are thinking of all of those families who have been bereaved through suicide.

You would think that the Deputy Chair of the Committee and I had co-ordinated our response to the debate. It has not been co-ordinated, but I was going to quote the same book that he quoted. It is called 'The Last Taboo', and people should read it if they get the opportunity to do so. I was thinking about your circumstances, Kieran, and, without getting into other people's personal circumstances, suicide

has affected a lot of us, whether directly or indirectly. There is a quote at the back of the book:

"In life, sometimes you can meet extraordinary people who open their hearts and souls to bring greatness to anyone who takes the time to read their story. Please read and you will be inspired."

The book contains the families' stories, and I assume that people can contact the Niamh Louise Foundation to get a copy of it.

I firmly believe that if we as an Assembly are to target the issues of suicide, self-harm and mental health and our approach to it, and even the issue of life skills, we need to have a comprehensive, joined-up approach. I am heartened by the Minister's comments. We need that approach right across the Executive, with all Departments making it a priority. I know that a lot of good work is being done in Departments, but I am concerned that there is not that co-ordinated, joined-up approach. The Minister mentioned the ministerial group on suicide and self-harm, and I remind the Minister that that group had not met for 18 months, even though suicide was increasing daily. That aside, I commend the work that is being done among some Departments. I felt that it was important to bring the motion to the Assembly today, because we need that approach.

A number of Members gave out statistics, and I will not go into those. This is not just a young person's illness, and it is not just killing our young people. Recent statistics have found that there are increasing trends among males over 40. It cuts across all barriers, all housing estates and all families. It cuts across whether you are employed or unemployed and whether you have a family or are single. This is killing our people. Clustering seems to be a big issue in some areas, and Paula Bradley mentioned that. Parallel to that, you are right; some people are very uncomfortable talking about suicide, and we need to deal with that taboo subject.

In case anybody is under any illusion, I welcome and commend the work that the Public Health Agency has been doing. Not once in the course of the debate did I hear anybody criticise the Public Health Agency. I want to send out the clear message that it is doing a lot of good work, but it is not just down to the Public Health Agency or the Minister of Health. It needs to be everybody. We need to have that expansion. Roy Beggs touched on the fact that it is clear that other Departments have a role, and the Minister highlighted the fact that those

Departments are there and that all Ministers need to make this an important issue in their Department.

Conall McDevitt said that this is the third or fourth time that the Assembly has discussed this issue and that that shows how important it is. I am not known as a cynic, but the cynic in me says that this is the fourth time that we have discussed this and suicide is still on the increase. Again, I agree with Conall that we must recognise the positive responses that communities have developed to deal with suicide. Kieran referred to his personal circumstances and the difficulty of trying to understand why. We need to look after people and look out for people and look for the signs that they are under pressure.

Mickey Brady, like other Members, highlighted the fact that it does not just affect young people. Older people and rural isolation are also factors. A number of Members touched on the issue of welfare reform and the financial distress that people are finding themselves under. That is not a health issue, but the health system has to pick up the pieces when people cannot cope. That is why we need a co-ordinated approach to this.

Gordon Dunne said that suicide continues to be a real problem for society. He emphasised the need for schools to have support mechanisms and counselling in place. The information that I am receiving, Gordon, is that there is a waiting list for this. So, if we are encouraging young people, through schools, to access that counselling service, it is very hard to tell them that they might have to wait for a week or two weeks. Again, Gordon highlighted the fact that we need cross-cutting action.

Maeve McLaughlin said that we need to ask ourselves whether we are doing enough to tackle suicide, and I agree totally with her. Mental health is given a lower priority than physical health in our system, and we need to tackle the stigma attached to mental health issues. In her contribution, Pam Brown said that suicide has a startling impact on families. One of the key difficulties is highlighting services and ensuring that they are provided in a joined-up way. Again, that is an issue. People do not know what services are there and, unfortunately, only want to know what services are there when they need them. We need to have ways of ensuring that that information is there.

Sam Gardiner touched on the fact that, worldwide, there is a suicide every 40 seconds. That is how quick it is, so, as a society, we

need to get our head around that. The economic downturn has made a major contribution to the growing incidence of suicide and mental health problems. I think that Sam is right to say that the media needs to take a responsible attitude to how it reports suicide. The media is a key partner, and we should want to take a partnership approach to it. I know, through the National Union of Journalists, that there have been negotiations on this and other sensitive issues, such as sexual abuse. It is important that the media plays its part.

George Robinson agreed that there needs to be cross-departmental work. He said that other countries are seeing a fall in the number of suicides, and that perhaps we should learn the lessons from that.

Pat Ramsey, like many who spoke, paid tribute to those working on suicide support and prevention. I firmly believe that, but for that work, the suicide figures would be higher. Such people are unsung heroes of our communities. They do not work nine-to-five jobs; a lot of them are volunteers, and their work is 24/7, and we need to recognise that.

Jim Wells, the Deputy Chairperson, mentioned the work of the Niamh Louise Foundation. As I said in my opening remarks, I had a meeting this morning, along with the deputy First Minister, with representatives of PIPS and the Niamh Louise Foundation on that very issue. The deputy First Minister has once again committed himself to ensuring that this becomes a priority through the Executive.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she accept that the foundation, although doing marvellous work, has struggled to find funding to continue the excellent services that it offers? In a sense, it does not seem to fit into any of the pockets for funding streams for the work that it does.

Ms S Ramsey: Yes. I do not want to be critical in this debate, but you have highlighted a point. During the Committee's inquiry into health inequalities, we wrote to all the Ministers about how their Departments deal with health inequalities in constituencies, and, to my horror, it is as though we were still in our silos. Some Ministers wrote back to say that they did not believe that they had a remit to deal with health inequalities. If you were talking about inward investment or finance and personnel, if that money is not there, how can you tackle all that? The refreshed Protect Life strategy has closed down some of that opportunity for some of the groups, and that is a criticism of that happening. So, there is no criticism of the work of the PHA

or the work that is done on the ground. The criticism is that we have closed that funding down.

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

Ms S Ramsey: Just quickly, Mr Deputy Speaker, I think that it is important that I end this with a quotation from a bereaved mother, because we need this hope.

Mr Deputy Speaker: All right.

Ms S Ramsey:

"Look at prevention, rather than reaction. It is not the people who have been affected by suicide who need to be made aware of it; it is those who have not been touched who need to be aware of the devastation it causes."

I ask everyone to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the significant rise in suicide rates in Northern Ireland over the last 15 years; and calls on the Executive to prioritise suicide prevention strategies.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members may take their ease for a few seconds while we change the top table.

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

Topical Questions

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a motion from the Committee on Procedures. The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes 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 wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee on Procedures on its inquiry into topical questions.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I

am pleased to bring the report on the Committee's inquiry into topical questions to the Chamber today. Although it may be a short report, I believe that the implementation of the recommendations has the potential to transform Question Time and, most importantly, to increase public engagement with the Assembly.

The Committee considered the existing opportunities for questioning Ministers and holding them to account and concluded that, although there are already a number of options for scrutinising Ministers, opportunities for posing questions are largely scripted and the timing for tabling questions can result in a loss of topicality. Questions for oral answer are published seven or eight working days before they are due to be taken in the Chamber, which means that newly emerging issues that arise between the time questions are submitted and asked in the Chamber cannot be covered. Although questions for urgent oral answer provide some opportunity for more current questioning, those are limited to single topics and are selected at the discretion of the Speaker.

The Committee considered the potential benefits of introducing a system for asking topical questions of Ministers, and those are outlined in the report. Topical questions would provide an additional opportunity for Members to scrutinise Ministers and hold them to account on more immediate issues while a topic was still current. Greater spontaneity and topicality has the potential to assist in encouraging a livelier and better-attended Question Time and to ensure that sessions are meaningful and current. As I said, it is hoped that the introduction of topical questions would increase public engagement with the Assembly.

Having considered the potential benefits of topical questions, along with the views of stakeholders and the experience in other legislatures where a system of topical questioning operates, the Committee concluded that a facility for asking topical questions of Ministers should be introduced in the Assembly. However, given the nature of the work of the Assembly Commission, the Committee agreed that it was not necessary to provide additional opportunities for questioning its Members and, therefore, recommended that the Assembly Commission be excluded from the topical questions rota.

Having agreed that a system for asking topical questions should be introduced, the Committee considered the arrangements for managing the process. One of the key issues considered by the Committee was whether topical questions

should be spontaneous or whether notice should be given to ensure that the information is available to provide an answer. The Committee was clear that the strategic aim of topical questions was to provide a forum to gain current information from Ministers that could then inform further questioning and consideration. With the exception of questions for urgent oral answer, the existing opportunities for posing questions are largely scripted, as several days' notice is given for Ministers to prepare their responses. It is worth noting that, in the written submission from the Executive Committee, the view of Ministers was that, if introduced, topical questions should be spontaneous. Having considered the views expressed in each of the written submissions and the processes in place in other legislatures, the Committee recommended that topical questions should, therefore, be spontaneous. Ministers would be informed, three working days in advance of their topical Question Time, of only the names of the Members selected to ask questions and the order in which they would be called. No notice of the content of the question itself need be provided in advance. Such an approach would go a long way to providing spontaneity, but it would also allow Ministers some opportunity to identify individual constituency issues that had the potential to be the focus of questioning from individual Members and, therefore, provide an opportunity to centre any preparation on those.

With regard to the rules surrounding the admissibility of topical questions, the Committee agreed that, in common with the Scottish Parliament and House of Commons, no specific definition of topical questions or topicality was necessary. However, the Committee agreed that broad admissibility criteria would need to be set; namely, that topical questions may relate to constituency or regional issues and must relate to a Minister's official responsibilities. The Committee also agreed that the admissibility criteria for questions for oral and written answer currently set out in Standing Orders should also apply to topical questions.

4.15 pm

Section 6 contains a number of recommendations dealing with the frequency of topical questions, to whom they will be directed, time limits and the selection process. The Committee considered the current mechanisms for asking questions of Ministers and how the introduction of topical questions could be built around those. The Committee agreed that topical questions should form part of the existing Question Time rota, with Ministers

required to answer topical questions on the same day as they are scheduled to answer oral questions. The Committee has recommended that an additional 15 minutes be allocated to Question Time to each Minister to answer topical questions.

To simplify business scheduling and to ensure continuity in the Chamber, the Committee has recommended that the Minister in attendance answers topical questions in the 15 minutes preceding their regular Question Time slot. At the end of the 15 minutes, or when all topical questions have been asked, whichever is the earlier, business can then move on immediately to Question Time for the same Minister.

The Committee has also recommended that the starting times for Question Time should be synchronised. That means that questions to the relevant Minister, including topical questions and oral questions, would run for 45-minute slots from 2.00 pm to 3.30 pm on Mondays and Tuesdays. The Committee agreed that each Member who asks a topical question should be entitled to a supplementary question. However, to keep momentum, the Committee recommended that no other Members, including Committee Chairpersons, should be offered the option to ask supplementary questions.

The Committee also considered whether time limits should be imposed on responses to topical questions and agreed that those should reflect the time limits already established in Standing Orders for oral questions, whereby Ministers have up to two minutes to respond, which may be extended at the Speaker's discretion.

In considering the process to be used for the selection of topical questions, the Committee took into account the selection processes currently used for Question Time. The Committee recommended that all Members wishing to be considered for topical Question Time on a particular day should submit their names to the Business Office, where they will be included in a ballot and then in a shuffle to determine who will put topical questions and in what order they will be put to the relevant Minister. The Committee then considered the deadlines for submission of names and the notification of the names selected to Ministers.

The Committee concluded that Members should submit their names before 10.30 am, three working days in advance of the relevant topical Question Time. That would mean a deadline of 10.30 am on Wednesdays for topical Question Time on the following Monday, and a deadline of 10.30 am on Thursdays for

topical Question Time on the following Tuesday. The ballot and shuffle will be held immediately after the deadline, and the top 10 successful names and the order in which they will be called for topical questions will then be provided to the Minister and to the successful Members before 1.00 pm on the same day. The Committee also agreed that Committee Chairpersons would not be offered an automatic opportunity to ask a topical question.

As I mentioned, no information on the content of the question would be required in advance. The Committee also agreed that no screening process would be required in advance of topical Question Time but rather that the broad admissibility criteria to which I referred will be applied, at the Speaker's discretion, in the Chamber.

The final recommendation is that the proposed process be trialled for six months, following which a review of the process and practices should be undertaken by the Committee on Procedures.

In conclusion, the introduction of topical questions provides a real opportunity to improve spontaneity and will give Members the chance to pursue issues that matter to them. The changes being proposed will provide an opportunity to make questioning more relevant, timely and more interesting for our constituents — we hope.

The Committee asks that the Assembly agrees the report and gives its approval to proceed with drafting Standing Orders to implement the report's findings and recommendations. I commend the report to the House and look forward to hearing the views of Members.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Chair for his very thorough and comprehensive outline of the Committee's report. The Committee, unusually in some respects, reached a consensus that everyone in the House can support.

The Committee approached topical questions with an open mind. I do not think that anybody had a closed mind. We felt that something was lacking in Question Time, in that too many questions were scripted, as were too many Ministers' answers. We wanted to inject a greater liveliness, spontaneity and topicality into Question Time. I think that our report gets that mixture right and will give rise to a much more interesting, lively and topical Question Time.

The report, if passed by the Assembly, and I presume that it will be, and the changes therein will last, at least initially, for six months. That

gives us a real opportunity to examine how the changes have been put in place and how effective they have been, as the Chair said, in transforming Question Time. That is a fair bit of time for the Assembly to get used to the new procedures and a proper period to test whether the changes achieve what we want to achieve, which is the much better scrutiny of Ministers.

Ministers may not like the changes, and we accept that they may find answering questions a more difficult task. However, we are the body that holds Ministers to account, and this is an opportunity for ordinary Back-Benchers like me to hold Ministers to account in the Chamber. I look forward to that.

We did our work well as a Committee. I congratulate the Chair on giving leadership on the Committee on Procedures and arriving at a report that was agreed by its membership. We could have divided on some aspects of it, but that was avoided, which is to be welcomed.

I will leave it there. I welcome the report. I think that it is a good report, which has the potential to transform Question Time, and I look forward to that happening.

Mr Lyttle: There is a frightening amount of consensus on this issue, but I also support the motion in my capacity as the Alliance Party member of the Committee on Procedures.

I initially raised the positive use of topical questions in other legislatures at the Committee on Procedures in November 2011. The Committee agreed to examine the issue, which will now, hopefully, lead to the introduction of that system at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Alliance Party submission to the Committee inquiry stated that we were in favour of the introduction of topical questions as we felt that it could improve the spontaneity of Question Time and increase ministerial accountability. It would also allow Members to table questions on matters that arise during the period between the current deadline for tabling questions and those questions being called on the Floor of the Assembly. The new procedure will, hopefully, also encourage more Members to attend and participate fully in Question Time.

I am sure that Ministers will be delighted and welcome the chance to answer more topical questions and avail themselves of the increased accountability that that will bring. It is vital that we continue to look at ways to improve how our legislature operates and make it more relevant and interesting to the public.

I pay tribute to staff past and present of the Committee on Procedures for their work on this proposal and to the Chairperson for taking it forward. The assistance that staff provided throughout the inquiry was invaluable in helping us to fine-tune the process that we will put in place in the Assembly.

Mr Clarke (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to conclude on this very short debate. I note the Chairman's remarks about how some Members might like the opportunity for spontaneity. However, when I look around the Chamber today, I do not think that anybody is enthused by it at all. *[Laughter.]* Let us hope that the enthusiasm for the spontaneous nature of questions that we had maybe hoped for arises in the next six months and that we see a different atmosphere in the Chamber.

The Chairman went into great detail on the nature of the topical questions and how we are going to implement them. As others said, that has been supported through the Committee, and that support has been useful in getting us to where we are today in presenting the report to the House.

Mr Maginness talked about the spontaneous nature of the questions and said that Ministers would, perhaps, not like the opportunity for spontaneous questions. I think that a similar theme came from Chris Lyttle. We should put on record that we got to the stage that we are at today with the agreement of even the Executive. The Executive were consulted on the topical question theme, and there was no resistance from the Executive on bringing that forward. I think that it is interesting to note that the Executive were keen to bring in the spontaneous nature of questioning at Question Time to make it more varying and more interesting.

I do not think there is anything else for me to say on the topic, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support the motion on the Committee report as moved by the Chairperson of the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee on Procedures on its inquiry into topical questions.

Private Members' Business

Integrated Education

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

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to acknowledge the expressed wish of parents to see their children educated in an integrated setting; to honour his Department's obligation to encourage and facilitate integrated education where demand exists; to make integration of controlled and maintained schools a specific objective of area planning; and to work, in particular with the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the Integrated Education Fund, to ease the process of the transformation of existing schools to integrated status.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am always pleased to bring an integrated education motion to the House. Before I move to our motion, perhaps I could deal with the DUP amendment. Had it been tabled as a stand-alone motion and subject to a wee bit of clarity on the term "single", I think that we probably could have endorsed it. In this case, however, the amendment changes the specific point that we want to get across in our motion, so we will vote against it.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Before turning to some of the specifics of our motion, I will outline some of the main values of integrated education. The case for integrated education is relatively obvious to most people, which explains why over 80% of those polled consistently support it. It is quite obvious that if you divide children at the arbitrarily selected age of four until the arbitrarily selected age of 16 or 18, that division will remain. If that division already defines your society and has consistently led on the path to distrust, disruption and, ultimately, violence, it is obviously asking for trouble to perpetuate it. Yet, we do perpetuate it by lining our children

up along those very same dividing lines in primary and post-primary schools. Frankly, if nursery schools and third-level education can be integrated in ethos, why on earth can primary and secondary-level education not be?

Let us also be clear about what integrated education is not. It is not some neutral option where children are sterilised of any identity, as some people like to argue.

On the contrary, the whole purpose of the integrated ethos is to deliver a positive sense of self-identity, while encouraging understanding and respect for other identities. If anybody has never visited an integrated school, I suggest that they do so and perhaps they will see what I mean by that.

4.30 pm

In recent months, it has been demonstrated fairly clearly that identity continues to be expressed, where it is expressed at all, in negative and even intimidating ways. That is a direct product of what Dr John Dunlop referred to as the sectarian pyramid. If people are brought up in ignorance of other identities, it will inevitably, among a minority, breed intolerance, fear and hatred and then, among a minority that is much smaller but is still significant, mayhem and, finally, violence. Although things have improved over the past 15 years, we need to be in no doubt that the seeds of conflict continue to exist; they are state-sponsored from the age of four.

In the motion, we have specifically included a reference to the "expressed wish of parents". That does not just come from opinion polls, although the evidence from them is consistent; it comes through expressed parental choice for integrated education. Parents who choose state or maintained schools are guaranteed that selection now and in the foreseeable future, regardless of the Education Bill that may or may not be passed in the Assembly at some stage in the future. However, parents who choose integrated schooling receive no such guarantee. Indeed, we have reached the stage where parents have raised money elsewhere — in north America and Australasia — to set up an integrated school. When was the last time that parents were forced to raise funds to set up a school with an obviously segregated ethos? There is also the reality of the legislative requirements placed on the Minister, notably since the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. The Department is not just morally obliged to meet parental demand, which is not currently the case; it is legally obliged to do so.

I turn to area planning. With the ongoing reform of the schools estate, there is a clear requirement for the facilitation and encouragement of integrated education to take place as part of that reform. There is a clear moral, legal and common-sense entitlement to integrated education. If that is not currently being met — it is not — any reform needs to have as a core aim changes designed to ensure that it is met in the future. Frankly, the current approach to area planning and education policy in general seems almost to be one of "anything but integrated". The recent decision in Moy to maintain segregated education in the same building is a classic case. Frankly, it defies all logic. It was, yet again, a meek acceptance of segregation, rather than determined moral and legal leadership to deliver on integration. Integration, not segregation, must be the default option. The fundamental problem is that the needs-based model inherent to area planning assumes and thus embeds segregation. The policy is, therefore, designed not to deliver reform but to continue to deliver the status quo in direct contravention of the Education Reform Order and parents' wishes.

We have seen good progress in integrated education since 1981, not least of which was Ulidia Integrated College's achievement of the best A-level results of any school in Northern Ireland last year. However, something that is pretty obvious, which we have not seen, is the merger of a controlled school and a maintained school into a single school. Workplaces have become integrated. In many areas, neighbourhoods have become increasingly integrated. Inevitably, some schools have, therefore, in practice, become increasingly mixed with regard to the religious background of their intake. For all of that, however, we have not yet seen a single merger of what are, in effect, Protestant and Catholic schools. For all the mixing, it remains the case that over 90% of children attend schools whose intake is over 90% from a single religious background. That is in a country where the demographic split is actually 48% and 45%. Let us get over the pretence that there is no problem here and that gently trundling along with a system that inherently encourages segregation from the age of four is either desirable or feasible. That is why the merging of controlled and maintained schools, the absence of which thus far is the obvious elephant in the room, should be prioritised as a specific policy goal, not least as part of area planning.

There has been the temptation to suggest that shared schooling or general mixing is sufficient, but, for reasons that I have already noted, it just

is not. Nevertheless, it is important to note that no one, not even the Council for Integrated Education, is interested in adding extra sectors to a system that is already administratively overcomplex. What is clear is that parents want integrated education, but the system literally legislates against it. Therefore, another aspect of our motion is to ask the Minister to consider how to make the overall transformation process simpler, something that would help the aforementioned objective of enabling schools to merge but would also enable non-merging schools to declare themselves of integrated ethos.

I have little doubt that the Council for Integrated Education and the IEF can come forward with ideas and proposals; indeed, I have worked with them to try to develop some. There is no doubt that the requirement on their side is being met. What is required, therefore, is a clear and demonstrable willingness from the Minister to work in partnership with them to deliver and to meet legal and popular requirements through merging existing schools and enabling existing schools to convert to integrated status more easily. This requires some clear steps to be accepted. First, the entitlement of parents is to integrated education, not segregated. The system should be designed to deliver integrated education as a default, in line with parental demand. The evidence that that entitlement is being met and that the system is working will be when controlled and maintained schools integrate with each other to form not segregated schools in single buildings but integrated schools in single buildings. Every aspect of education policy, not least area planning, should show demonstrable evidence of reform in this direction, not maintenance of a status quo that embeds segregation. A final objective would be the easing of the current transformation requirements for schools wishing to become integrated and their replacement with a much more straightforward system of conversion to an integrated ethos. At present, a request for transformation is treated in the same way as a development proposal for the closure or the establishment of a school. It is just not relevant.

I know that my time is up. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response and that of other parties.

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "educated" and insert

"in accordance with their wishes, including in an integrated setting; urges the Minister to guarantee parity of esteem for all sectors with

the establishment of sectoral bodies to support parental choice; and further calls on the Minister to encourage all sectoral bodies to promote the development of a single shared education system based upon equality of treatment for all."

Before moving to the substance of the amendment, I will outline the reasons why my party cannot support the motion as tabled. Unfortunately, the motion is, in practical terms, unworkable.

The DUP is supportive of parental choice. If a parent wishes to send his or her child to a school, whether it is integrated, controlled, maintained, voluntary or even Irish-medium, that parental choice will be respected as long as those sectors exist. What is fundamentally wrong with the motion is that it is a clumsy attempt to circumvent the principles of shared education in favour of one particular sector. Shared education and integrated education are not mutually interchangeable terms. Integrated education is a specific type of shared education, but shared education, taken as a whole, encompasses a wide variety of mechanisms of delivery.

In the vast majority of instances, a school will choose to transform to an integrated school not because of some principled position but as a means of last resort to save the school and offer it a stay of execution. While we support choice, transformation is often the politics of last choice. Easing the process of transformation runs counterintuitive to the principles of area-based planning and, ironically, to the aim of shared education. Area-based planning and the principle of shared education allow different schools to operate in a co-operative way, as a large number already do. Easing that process of transformation will mean that a school will effectively be retreating into a sectoral silo, maybe not through choice but as an unintended consequence.

Only schools from the controlled sector have transformed into integrated schools, and that, in itself, is no coincidence. It is a well-recognised fact that the maintained sector would rather close a school than transform it. So, for the motion to state

"make integration of controlled and maintained schools a specific objective of area planning"

is to ignore the reality of the situation. Making integration a specific objective negates the many potential benefits of sharing and co-operation, particularly given the fact that CCMS

would run a mile from it. In effect, what that says to the controlled sector is this: as long as you choose to become integrated, your role in area planning is satisfied.

The overarching desire of my party is to see our children educated together. That is our long-term goal. However, the strictures of what exists in the integrated system are not the means by which that can be achieved. If we look at the 22 schools that have been transformed, we see that only eight meet the religion test. So, in respect of being integrated, they fail to meet their own criteria. I would be interested to know whether the Minister can provide figures for the other integrated schools to clarify how many of them meet the religious breakdown criterion.

Instead of easing the transformation process and affording schools temporary statutory protection, I would prefer to see schools looking to area planning as an opportunity to be part of the means to afford all our children the best education possible. Instead of children being taught in composite classes in a couple of classrooms, which can be detrimental to their progress, they could take advantage of a wider school estate. The Alliance Party really needs to take off its blinkers in relation to integrated education as a panacea.

Schools in the Ards peninsula, which is in my constituency, are looking at local solutions and are coming together as cross-sectoral partners. They seek to take up the opportunity presented by area-based planning, but the Department needs to provide assistance to them because there is no legislative provision for that. The Minister has asked for creativity, but he must provide the means to allow for it. That may mean newbuilds, transport support, structural adaptation or, indeed, legislative change. Different areas may need different solutions, and not everywhere will require a Lisanelly-style campus.

I now turn to the specifics of our amendment. I would like to stress that it has been tabled to ensure parity of esteem for all sectors. Although my party ultimately wishes to see all our children educated together, we are not ignoring the reality of the current situation. Part of that reality is the necessity to ensure that there are —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Miss M McIlveen: — representative bodies, which are created to represent —

Mr Speaker: I apologise. The Member has 10 minutes.

Miss M McIlveen: — and promote the interests of each diverse sector. It is important that there is parity of esteem going forward. Regardless of its size, a sector without a voice or an advocate is in a significantly weaker position. The maintained sector has CCMS, the integrated sector has NICIE and the Irish-medium sector has CnaG, but other sectors such as the controlled and voluntary grammars are not on the same footing. If we are to have discussions about shared facilities, shared services and the quality of education offered to our children, we need the valuable input of those bodies in formulating a way forward.

The importance of establishing bodies on a similar footing should not be underestimated. Despite being the largest education sector in Northern Ireland and educating the majority of our children, the controlled sector has been deprived of a voice for years and has suffered as a result. If there were school closures, they would inevitably have been in the controlled sector. We are entering a new and potentially revolutionary phase in education in Northern Ireland. It is absolutely fundamental that the controlled sector is treated with the respect that it deserves and is afforded the opportunity to have an advocate and a representative body such as the other sectors have been able to enjoy.

Given the magnitude of what is proposed and the potential ramifications, it is inconceivable that we would be expected to move forward without such a body being established. Although we welcome the establishment of the controlled sector support working group and pay tribute to those dedicated to the controlled sector, that body needs to be resourced and encouraged so that it is in a position to fulfil the need for an established body. Other sectoral bodies have existed for many years. Therefore, the controlled sector working group is, understandably, lagging behind. When it is established, it cannot be a toothless organisation; it needs to be properly resourced to represent the schools in the sector, and it must have a key role in area planning. I look to the Minister to commit to that today. Even as a working group, it needs to be part of the ongoing discussions on area planning. That said, the Department must, as a matter of urgency, seek to establish it as a sectoral body.

4.45 pm

In the discussions around area planning, no favouritism should be shown to one sector to the detriment of others. Unfortunately, that is what is being sought in the Alliance Party's motion today. By showing favouritism to the integrated sector, we would create a stumbling block to sharing. We can look at the recent example of Moy, where St John's Primary School and Moy Regional Primary School will share a building. That is one vision of what sharing can look like: there is a shared gym, music and IT classes, but each school maintains its individuality and ethos. Both schools continue to exist, but costs are reduced and there is greater opportunity for children from different backgrounds to connect. A number of schools out there are in a similar position, where area planning should be seen as an opportunity to be grasped.

The Programme for Government saw the establishment of a ministerial advisory group to explore and bring forward recommendations to advance shared education. That advisory group is looking at options around shared education, such as sharing classes and campuses. Its report is due very shortly. I look forward to hearing what that group comes up with, and I hope that it contains the necessary vision that will lead to the ultimate aim of a more streamlined education system in which our children are not segregated.

The Programme for Government has a stated aim that all children should have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015 and that the number of schools sharing facilities should substantially increase by 2015. The Alliance Party's motion today seeks to undermine what the party agreed under that programme.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Miss M McIlveen: I am running out of time, so I will not give way in this instance.

Instead of being tied to the integrated sector of the Alliance Party, we should encourage more shared schemes that will have a broader impact on cross-community contact. If the Alliance Party needs clarity on the difference between integrated and shared education, I say that it is evolutionary, not revolutionary. It is bottom-up, not top-down. It is organic rather than structural. It will mean different things to different people depending on specific communities. It should be based on respect for difference and founded on the partnership of equals.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As has been outlined by Members who have spoken previously, integrated education plays an important role in the life of many of our children and young people. In a divided society such as the North, many educationalists and parents view an integrated setting as the best way to tackle the poisonous legacy of conflict and the enduring problem of sectarianism. In many integrated schools across the North, great progress has been made on that front as well as achieving very high educational outcomes. In my patch of south Down, integrated schools such as Shimna Integrated College in Newcastle and Drumlins Integrated Primary School in Ballynahinch are great examples of integrated environments in which the educational achievements of the pupils match the ability of the school to create an environment in which integration is clearly having a positive impact on the wider learning process. The success of Drumlins is amplified when you consider the fact that it targets the underachievement of pupils from an area of social deprivation. Indeed, 32% of the pupils are entitled to free school meals, while 34% have special educational needs. Moreover, the success of Drumlins Integrated Primary School is all the more remarkable when you consider the challenges that the school has faced regarding suitable accommodation over the past 10 years. It still faces those in the months ahead as it works tirelessly to meet the increasing demands of the parents who value the school so highly.

It would, however, be wrong to suggest that integrated is the only educational setting that is able to promote such integration of our young people. Of course, it would be unwise to elevate the integration of our young people above the primacy of the need for sustainable educational achievement. Indeed, the most important dynamic of the debate must be the best way to educate our children, not the best way to promote or support one particular education sector or another. As I have outlined, integrated education is a very important facet of our system, but so are faith-based schools and the Irish-medium sector. While acknowledging the Department's obligation to encourage and facilitate integrated education where demand exists, we must acknowledge that all parents have the right to choose where and how their children should be educated.

The view that the Education Department is somehow not listening to the wants of the integrated sector does not stand up. In the run-up to the last Assembly election, the IEF published a report that outlined two main

findings: first, the vast majority of people support schools sharing facilities, partnering or collaborating with other schools of different religious traditions; and the vast majority of the public want an independent organisation to review our education system, including a review of the future structures of sharing and integration. The Minister not only invited the OECD to carry out such an analysis of our system but established a ministerial advisory group to report on the best way to advance such sharing, integration and collaboration. As outlined by the previous Member who spoke, we look forward to seeing what will no doubt be a very challenging report next week and seeing what it will mean going forward.

We must remember and recognise that, rather than the crude process of assimilation that can sometimes take place in a rigid integrated framework, there is also a demand for the individual ethos of different sectors to be respected and protected at the same time as ensuring effective collaboration and integration. That is outlined especially in the potential of the Lisanelly shared education campus in Omagh. It is a unique opportunity for quite inspirational collaboration and integration for the young people of Omagh and the adjacent area, in which shared educational, social and environmental projects will have a huge impact on the local community for all the right reasons. With an investment of some £300 million in the economy and the knock-on effect of 3,000 jobs, you can see the potential that that project could have not just for our education system but for the wider economy.

Although we recognise that the integrated sector is very important, it is not the only piece of the jigsaw. Of course, integrating our children in tackling the poisonous legacy of conflict and sectarianism is very important, but the primacy of educational outcomes must stay top of the list.

Mr Rogers: I apologise to Mr Lunn for missing the first minute of the debate. I will come back to it.

I welcome the opportunity to debate the ways in which integrated education can fit into and enhance our education system. Along with other education sectors, the integrated sector makes an invaluable contribution to the welfare of our young people. Locally, I am very aware of the excellent work of Kilbroney Integrated Primary School and Shimna Integrated College under the dedicated leadership of Denise Moorehead and Kevin Lambe respectively.

Since the Good Friday Agreement, the number of integrated schools has risen from 40 to 62, which is to be welcomed. In allocating funding, the Department of Education fulfils its statutory duty to facilitate the development of integrated education. The SDLP commends the vital contribution that the integrated sector makes.

I am concerned that the Alliance Party seems to suggest that integrated schools should be given priority by the Department of Education, almost to the detriment of other educational establishments. That mindset seems to eliminate the ability of parents to exercise choice when it comes to selecting schools for their children. Parental choice is arguably the cornerstone of any effective education system and should be fiercely guarded. I am concerned that pouring all our efforts into one form of educational institution is misguided.

Mr Lunn: I thank Mr Rogers for giving way. He referred to parental choice: that is exactly what the Alliance Party is demanding.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Rogers: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is clear that the Alliance Party sees no role for faith-based education. That is a fundamental flaw in the motion. Indeed, where is mention made of what controlled schools do?

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Rogers: No, I am not giving way again.

Mr Lyttle: You are misrepresenting the case that we made.

Mr Rogers: I am not sure that Mr Lyttle heard what I said. He was having a conversation when I started to speak.

The real future for the education system is in building on the opportunities for a variety of school types, including faith schools. In an increasingly secular society, many of us see our faith as the foundation of everything that we say and do. I have experienced faith-based education as a pupil, a parent and a teacher. Mr Lunn referred to his visits to schools. I have not just visited schools; I have spent 30 years in them, and I resent the use of terms such as "segregated ethos". Over those 30 years, neither I nor my colleagues promoted a segregated ethos.

Respect is also central to faith-based education. Look at the mission statement of any of our schools and, more importantly, just observe how they live their faith, and you will see that they promote tolerance of difference that allows students to expand their minds, share views and explore ideas in a community of shared respect and support. Building a truly shared future must include prioritising respect for the rights of and choices made by parents and young people. The terms of reference for area planning specifically require the planning authorities to consider and produce proposals for shared education, and that is welcome.

In Northern Ireland, we are challenged to confront segregation in all its forms, as was clearly highlighted by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. We can all point to a wide range of schools in the controlled and maintained sectors that already adopt a shared system for learning. Such schools, along with some quality integrated schools, are a real asset to our education system. Pupils from different backgrounds are being educated together right across the North, and I can point to good practice across the sectors, but we can do more to ensure that schools work collaboratively. Shared education, be it cross-community or cross-border, can become an opportunity for keeping education alive in our rural areas.

The bit of the DUP amendment that jumps out at me is its reference to "a single shared education system". I want some clarity on where in that there is a place for faith-based education. Our priority must be to strive for the highest standards in education and learning, and to give young people access to a broad range of high-quality education institutions. The Minister must avoid attempts to prioritise any form of education institution over another. The SDLP recognises the advances made in shared education, and we urge the Minister to ensure that the Department prioritises the promotion of shared and integrated education in all its variety of forms.

Mr Kinahan: I also welcome the chance to speak in this phenomenally important debate, which should frame the whole debate on our education system. It is a pity that it is squeezed into just an hour and a half.

The Ulster Unionist Party supports certain aspects of the motion, such as its call:

"to see their children educated in an integrated setting".

However, there is so much more to education than just that, and I find it slightly hard to listen to other schools being painted as the possible cause of violence, while ignoring the fact that many state schools do share and are extremely good examples of doing so. We need to congratulate all our teachers for their hard work, and particularly those in the integrated sector on its success. I also support the motion's call on the Department to honour its "obligation". There is an obligation to look at integrated education, but there is also an obligation to look further at shared education.

The Alliance Party's motion totally disregards the role that can be played by the controlled, maintained and voluntary grammar schools, and it will be hard work and persuasive argument, not the promotion of any individual sector above another, that will ultimately lead to a single education system. We know that there are now some 21,000 children in integrated education, up from 8,000. We also know that some 500 were denied their choice of integrated education. Yet, as we have heard, in all of this, there is always the need for parental choice. That is not just the choice of integrated education, it is the choice of faith — Protestant or Catholic — mixed and all types of schooling. In the plethora of change that is today going through the education system, it sometimes seems as though all of that has been forgotten.

The Programme for Government purports to support shared education, yet we see little of it happening. Look at area planning, and we see two separate streams, with a little bit of integration but not enough. It is even worse if we look at ESA, where it is ignored again. No places on its board are reserved for the integrated sector, and there is nothing to encourage shared education. Yet, my statistics show that 70% of parents want integration, and Mr Lunn tells us that the figure is 80% — at the moment, we provide only 7%.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: Yes.

5.00 pm

Mr Newton: I take the Member's point about ESA, and so on, but does he agree with me that there is a huge deficit in the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board in particular, where the voices of parents are not heard through their political representatives on either board? The Minister's failure to appoint eligible members who have gone through the sift for

BELB, and, indeed, his failure to address the issue of three commissioners running the South Eastern Education and Library Board makes a great difference to the functioning of both bodies.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, and I very much agree with the Member. I feel that, throughout the whole education system, we do not have a good method that allows us actually to listen to parents or, indeed, to teachers.

If we are to respect religious belief, we must also remember that we need to respect those who do not have the same strength in their religious belief. It is essential that, all the way through our education system, we set up something that leads towards the single shared education system that the DUP mentioned today and that we as a party have been pushing for a great length of time. We need to find a way of coaxing and massaging everything so that everyone works towards the single education system. However, you get there by sharing, not just through integration.

We have some 1,225 schools, yet, in my brief time in the Education Committee, I have seen only five or six examples of shared education coming through in area planning. There are good examples in Ballycastle, Crumlin, Moy and in Duneane, which is to the north of my patch, that are all looking very cleverly at different ways to move forward. What we really need from the Minister is an agreed framework — something along the lines of the Belfast Agreement. I have called for that before.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: No, I would like to carry on, thank you. We should have consensus on the way forward and actually sit down and discuss it so that we are all going in the same direction. That is what is really missing.

I cannot wholly support the Alliance motion, because its last three lines are impractical and do not suggest anything that we can put in place. I like the idea of where we are going, but I fully support the DUP amendment. I like the idea, as does my party, of parity of esteem and the need for sectoral bodies of all types. We need to get an education system that looks after everybody. As a party, we support the amendment.

Mr Storey: I support my party's amendment. At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of a controlled integrated school in Ballymoney. I may come back to that point in a moment or two. I commend my colleague Michelle McIlveen, who adequately set out the issues that we see as important.

Every time that we discuss education in the Chamber, it is a reflection of the importance that we place on our young people being educated in our schools. It would be only right and fair to concur with other Members who, without the segregation of sectors, said to all our teachers in all our schools that, despite the challenges and difficulties that have beset our education system over the years, they have continued, year on year, to do a job that is the envy of many other places in the United Kingdom and further afield. That is not to say that there are not issues or problems, but we need to place on record our appreciation to those in our education system, including teachers, boards of governors and all those who are associated with our schools.

One question needs to be posed as we come to the House today. It is 90 years since Lord Londonderry's Education Act in 1923, and we should remember that he wanted to go further than any in this House would perhaps like to. In fact, if we read the Act correctly and accurately, we see that he wanted a completely and absolutely integrated education system. We need to say that the reason why we are still having the debate about a segregated, separated education system is because the Catholic sector has ensured since then that its opposition to the Lynn Committee, its opposition to the appointments to the education committees in 1923 and successively down through the years has remained. It has said: we want to remain ourselves alone; we want to stay as we are; we want to have the power to control and do all that we do within our sector. It is not a case of others being asked why they should change; it is a case of us putting the challenge to the maintained sector as to why, as my colleague Michelle McIlveen alluded to, since the introduction of transformation, which allows a school to become an integrated school, not one maintained school has transformed, yet the controlled sector has. Why, at every turn in the history of our education system, has it been the controlled sector — the state sector — that has had to take the greater degree of hits, cuts, challenges and change, which has ultimately, I believe, been damaging to our system?

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that the answer to his question is that the parents in those controlled schools he talks about decided to go for transformation. It was parental choice.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Storey: Thank you. I am glad that the Member has come to the issue of parental choice. I noted that Mr Hazzard made a comment about how and where their children are to be educated. I am glad that, when it comes to the issue of parental choice, that probably includes grammar schools, because you have to be consistent. Let me say this about parental choice, and I speak as a member of the board of governors of a controlled integrated school: it was not about the ethos and identity of the school; it was a numbers game. It was clearly done because the school's managing authority at the time felt that if it did not do it, an integrated school would open up down the road and it would end up in a situation where it lost parents and pupils. If the numbers go down, the finance goes down, and you end up in a situation where the school is challenged financially.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: What has happened, not in all but in some cases, is that there has been an integration process and a proposal to transform driven by survival and the numbers game. I will give way to the Member.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. He has said that, effectively, the schools realised that if they did not provide integrated education, parents would demand it elsewhere. Parents are voting with their feet. They are going to integrated schools and, where none exists, they are demanding one. We keep hearing that there is no demand for integrated education, yet the experience that the Member outlines proves that there is.

Mr Storey: The figures clearly prove the opposite. Look at the most recent MORI poll. It shows that somewhere in the region of 88% or 90% of people will say that they are up for an integrated system. Remember that some of those figures were collated at party conferences. We have heard a lot today about statistics and surveys gathered at party conferences. One survey that was carried out at all our party conferences clearly indicated that, when people are asked, they will say that, yes, they are up for an integrated system. But

what is the reality? Let us deal with the facts. Still only 6% of our school population —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Storey: — is integrated. Let us deal with the method that will ensure greater sharing in the future. The best way of doing that, I believe —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Storey: — is ensuring that shared education is part and parcel of the process. I would love to have more time to develop that, but unfortunately the Speaker has called an end to my time.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would first like to apologise to Mr Lunn for not being in the Chamber at the start of the debate. I welcome the opportunity to speak. My party has actively supported, and will continue to support, those who wish to have their children educated in an integrated sector. Where demand for an integrated school is established, we will support that. My party believes wholly in secular education and multi-denominational schools. Good education from an early age helps to mould how we think. It affects us all in a manner of ways: how we interact with each other; how we relate to the institution where we are educated, which, in its own way, depends on us and shapes our lives; and how we view the world at a social and cultural level.

The issue of the curriculum is central to any discussion on integrated education that takes place here today. A shared curriculum must embrace all identities and celebrate the diversity that enriches us all.

A report on attitudes towards integrated education, which was commissioned by the Integrated Education Fund, indicated that support and preference for integrated schools is high. In 2003, a majority of people surveyed, some 82%, personally supported integrated education here. In 2011, that figure increased to 88% of those who were surveyed. However, we cannot also ignore the fact that further surveys determined that a majority of people also supported sharing facilities, partnering or collaborating across the traditional sectors.

There are 46 integrated primary and post-primary schools with a total of 14,200 students from a number of religious and cultural

backgrounds. As other contributors have said, we have to commend the teachers in those integrated settings who pride themselves on providing high standards of equality of education and on achieving exemplary educational outcomes for their students.

Teachers are expected to teach effectively across the different religious, socio-political and ability groups under the ethos of integrated education. Teachers in integrated education are also expected to work coherently and effectively in a team approach with parents, providing learning activities that constructively speak to diversity and to the contribution of mutual understanding and respect for all.

There are a number of schools that are in the early part of the process of moving to integrated status. I commend the hard work of the staff, the parents and pupils of those schools in fully achieving that aim, but I get a feeling from the proposer of the motion that that is not enough.

I want to speak about my personal story. I was educated in the Catholic sector. I valued that teaching experience and chose to pass it on to my children. I now have two grandchildren who are being taught through the medium of Irish, which was an option that my daughter chose for her children. It gives me great delight when I hear my grandchildren having little conversations and singing songs as Gaeilge. Being taught through the medium of Irish was never an option for my mother to choose for me, but, thankfully, that has changed.

The integrated sector, like the Irish-medium education sector, is a growing and demanding sector, and the demand for places is increasing. It is also important to note, as other contributors have said, that children are being educated together in the controlled and maintained sectors. Those advances are also welcomed. Our children and grandchildren now have the opportunity to be taught alongside others from different religious and cultural backgrounds. We are moving towards a non-segregated education system, which is to be welcomed.

Mrs Hale: I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the motion and welcome the debate so far. The integrated education sector has been a testament to perseverance, and I want to take nothing away from the dedicated people who established the sector and who, at huge personal cost, have offered parents a different choice.

However, despite what the motion states, parents have not exercised the choice for integrated education. Today, some 22,000

children are educated through the integrated system — less than 6% of all children in Northern Ireland — so it is not right to say that integrated education is the wish of parents. That is why I welcome the DUP amendment to the motion.

Where demand exists, parents should be allowed to educate their children in an integrated setting, but the key is parental choice. That is why I support the amendment. All education sectors should be respected and given parity of treatment by the Minister of Education. No sector — controlled, voluntary, maintained or integrated — should be elevated above another. Parental choice in education should be respected, promoted and defended.

Integrated education is one of four sectors that are available to parents in Northern Ireland. If we are to move towards a truly shared education system, in which all children learn together, the integrated sector must understand that it is part of the problem. All education sectors need to work together towards a truly shared system. Shared education can only be achieved when all sectors are treated equally and all sectors understand that no sectoral interest can be used to trump another school.

The reasons for moving forward on this basis are clear: the current Education Minister seeks to punish voluntary and controlled grammars, calling them selective apartheid, yet, on the other hand, defends the maintained system, calling it parental choice. Either the Minister believes in parental choice or he does not.

5.15 pm

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I draw her attention to a comment that Mr Lunn made. Referring to the Moy experience, he said that the decision "defies all logic". Having listened to Mr Lunn, it strikes me that the Alliance Party wants revolution not evolution. Surely he should welcome rather than denigrate what is being attempted in Moy. Does the Member agree with me that this is but a step rather than a final goal?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to her time.

Mrs Hale: I welcome Lord Morrow's intervention, and I agree fully, as does the party.

The protection of choice is being seriously diminished on a daily basis — many parents are not able to secure any schooling within the

community in which they reside — by a Minister who plays politics with the education of our children. That is why I and my party welcome the establishment of a sectoral support body for the controlled sector, as outlined in the Education Bill. For too long, the controlled sector has been the Cinderella of education in Northern Ireland. The easy option has always been the closing of controlled schools, but the easy option is rarely the best option. Now is the time for bravery. Now is the time for leadership.

The problem is this: if the integrated sector really believed in full sharing and in moving towards a single education system, it would be prepared to give up its sectoral rights and work with others. The future of education in Northern Ireland will not be solved by all schools moving sector and simply coming under the banner of the integrated system. Education will be transformed when we think much bigger than that. We need to be bold. We need to move to a new system that is shared by teachers, principals, parents and pupils. No one sector should be allowed or facilitated to move forward on its own. Education will not be best served if one sector is allowed to take over the others.

Equally, education will not be advanced while the Minister seeks to persecute certain sectors that fail to share his ideological outlook. That is why we have tabled the amendment. No sector or pupil can be left behind as we move forward. A truly shared future is within our grasp, but it can be attained only if all sectors are treated equally and if all sectors, including the integrated sector, are prepared to put sectoral interest to one side and to move forward together. That means respecting parental choice. That is why I support the amendment to the motion.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. At the outset, I should declare an interest in that I am a member of the board of governors of Corpus Christi College.

Greater integration in our education system is a laudable objective. It would be good for children and good for education. However, I take issue with the motion on a number of counts. In our context, integrated education refers primarily to the integration of children from different religious backgrounds. If Members are serious about integration, they need to expand the concept beyond narrow religious parameters. It must include all our children. I am wholeheartedly in support of the maximum integration of our young people. I do not care if they are Catholic, Protestant, any other religion or none. It does not matter if they

come from a British identity, an Irish identity or an ethnic minority or whether they are girls or boys, rich or poor, intellectually gifted or not. Every single one of them deserves, and is entitled to, the best start on their journey through life. We can help them on that journey by providing them with the best possible education system. I am sure that no one could disagree with those sentiments.

Nevertheless, the actions —

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. I declare an interest — I should have declared it earlier — as I am a director of NICIE. The Member set out his vision and said that truly integrated education means socio-economic integration and integration of religion and ethnicity.

All those things are in the integrated sector and are encouraged. I accept that there may be some movement to be made in schools of all religions and none — I emphasise the "none". At present, integrated education is the best option for that.

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added on to his time.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for his intervention, but, nevertheless, the actions of some in the integrated sector run contrary to that all-inclusive model. A clear example is when so-called integrated schools practise segregation by academic selection. There is a correlation between socio-economic background and the results of academic selection tests.

Mr Newton: How does the Member square the fact that he indicated the type of system that he wants, and would presumably say that parental choice is a feature of it, yet he wants to wipe out the grammar school system immediately?

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course I support parental preference. However, the grammar school system discriminates against a large percentage of our children — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Sheehan: As I was saying, we know that there is a correlation between socio-economic background and results in academic selection tests. That is most obvious among boys from working-class unionist backgrounds. In spite of that knowledge — this is the point that I made

to Mr Agnew — some integrated schools continue to reject children who fail those tests. Therefore, it is more than a bit hypocritical to pontificate about bringing children together from diverse religious backgrounds while insisting on keeping them apart on the basis of a discredited test that has clearly been shown to be detrimental to wider educational attainment. As I said, nowhere is that more obvious than among boys from working-class unionist communities.

That said, it would be wrong to tar the whole integrated sector with one brush, and I acknowledge the excellent work done in other parts of the integrated sector. It is clear that many parents want their children to be educated in integrated schools, and where that demand exists, the Department should continue to encourage and facilitate integrated education, as is its duty under the Good Friday Agreement. It appears that it is doing just that, given that there is a surplus of places in integrated schools. However, it would not be right to try to impose the integrated model across the board, as suggested in the motion:

"to make integration of controlled and maintained schools a specific objective of area planning".

Greater sharing of resources and greater co-operation is clearly desirable, but that should not be misrepresented as integrated education. No one seems to be arguing against parental preference — rightly so. When we give such importance to parental preference, we will always end up with a diverse school sector.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mr Sheehan: That is not necessarily a bad thing. In spite of my reservations, I support the motion.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I apologise to Mr Lunn for being absent from the Chamber for the beginning of the debate.

It is unfortunate that the Alliance Party motion is unimaginative. I strongly support the integrated sector, as do Ulster Unionist representatives at every level, many of whom, like me, have chosen to send their children to integrated schools. I support integrated education with both a capital "I" and a small "i". However, I have to ask why the Alliance Party believes that it is appropriate that every school should be, as the motion states, eased into integrated status.

For them, it is integrated with a capital "I" or nothing. How do they think that the controlled and maintained sectors would respond to reading that? What about the voluntary grammar sector and even the Irish-medium sector? It is also disappointing that only the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education and the Integrated Education Fund are referenced in the motion.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Newton: Does the Member agree that area planning is a very important feature of how we take forward education? Yet, in east Belfast, it is difficult to see evidence of any planning given that Dundonald High School is closing, the Orangefield High School closure has been delayed for another year and the Knockbreda and Newtownbreda merger is being rejected by one side while the other side is angry about the lack of investment. Does the Member agree that there is not an awful lot of evidence of area planning in that context?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to her time.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree that it surely has not been thought through. He makes some very valid points, and I thank him for that.

There is no mention of consulting any of the other bodies across education, not least the controlled and maintained sectoral bodies. I hope that this was just an oversight in the drafting because, if not, it goes to show how out of step the Alliance Party really is.

It is hugely unfortunate that education remains highly segregated in Northern Ireland. It is simply no longer acceptable that young people can progress through the education system with little understanding or knowledge of other cultures. That inevitably adds to the divisions apparent in our society. There is no doubt that having a number of different sectors educating individual blocks of young people is counterproductive to community relations. That is why, as Danny Kinahan said, my party firmly supports the long-term vision of a single educational system that accommodates children of all faiths and none equally.

Unsurprisingly, the debate has been laden with statistics on the increase in integrated schools and the apparent widespread support for integration among the public. However, the

Minister shows absolutely no interest in accepting widespread public support. We need only look at the responses to area planning, which showed overwhelming support for the retention of the Dickson plan in Craigavon, to see that. In spite of that support, the Minister continues to seek to undermine it at every single turn. He shows no interest in listening to the views of the public, choosing instead the comfort blanket of his narrow-minded political dogma. That stands as a barrier to ever achieving that single education system.

As mentioned earlier, when asked, roughly 70% of parents will say that they support integrated education — even more according to a recent poll for the 'Belfast Telegraph'. However, in reality, fewer than one in 10 of those parents sends their children to an integrated school.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I have already given way.

It would be interesting and revealing to conduct a straw poll on how many Members have done so because, in 2011-12, only 6-8% of the total enrolment was in the integrated sector. The reason for that apparent anomaly is relatively simple. As I mentioned, one of my sons attended New-Bridge Integrated College and the other attended Banbridge Academy, which are both excellent schools in their own right. No doubt, the Minister is itching to join me in praising the excellent general standard of all schools across Upper Bann, especially those in Craigavon that operate under the Dickson plan. The decisions that we made for our boys were purely a matter of parental choice, but the fact remains that many parents prefer the ethos of local controlled and maintained schools. Nevertheless, it goes to show why motions effectively calling for a single integrated sector through the total disbursement of other sectors and without sufficient work being done in advance are not only naive but mischievous.

Transforming Northern Ireland's system —

5.30 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is almost gone.

Mrs Dobson: — under what will hopefully be one central provider will take many years and hard work. I hope to see that in my lifetime.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, the House and,

indeed, the proposer of the motion for being delayed in coming to the Chamber and for having to leave it during the debate. I assure Members that I will deal in writing with any points that I do not answer as part of my response.

I dtús báire, ba mhaith liom ómós a léiriú don obair chapail atá déanta ag scoileanna iomlánaíthe le hoideachas a chur ar na páistí agus ar na daoine óga a fhreastalaíonn ar na scoileanna seo.

First, I pay tribute to the sterling work that a majority of integrated schools carry out in educating the children and young people who attend them. I acknowledge the expressed wish of parents to see their children educated in an integrated setting. I take very seriously my Department's statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. Indeed, last year, I made funding of £628,000 available to the Council for Integrated Education to assist it in carrying out its work to encourage and promote integrated education. That has increased to £646,000 in the current year. Since the establishment of the Integrated Education Fund, the Department has provided £4 million to enable it to assist with the capital costs of new schools. Those are real and practical measures of support. I have also provided funding to assist schools in the initial stages of transforming to integrated status. That funding is in the region of around £200,000 each year.

The motion refers to making the integration of controlled and maintained schools a specific objective of area planning. My terms of reference for the area planning work explicitly state that it should "take account" of the Good Friday Agreement and the statutory position on integrated education. I recently established a steering group to support the Department in taking forward work to co-ordinate and oversee the continuing development of the area planning process and the area plans. The Council for Integrated Education is represented on that group. Although I have some sympathy with that aspect of the motion, I also have to take into account that parents have a statutory right to state a preference on how their children should be educated.

The last part of the motion calls for the transformation process to be eased. I appreciate that that process can be cumbersome, and I am willing to consider whether I can make the process easier. However, that would be within the context of my consideration of the report on shared education, which its authors will launch next Monday.

Greater sharing and co-operation between schools and across sectors is likely to be the key to delivering success in greater sharing in our schools estate. Members will be aware that the Programme for Government commits to advancing shared education, specifically to ensure by 2015 that all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes. It also commits to increasing substantially the number of schools that share facilities. In July last year, I established a ministerial advisory group under the chairmanship of Professor Paul Connolly to explore and bring forward recommendations to meet those commitments. As I said, the ministerial advisory group will publish its report on Monday. I await with interest its findings and recommendations, and, indeed, I await with interest the public discussion and debate that it will stimulate. In setting the terms of reference for that work, I asked the members to take account of how shared education might address issues such as ethos, identity, good relations, respect for diversity and community cohesion.

Terms of reference for area planning explicitly encourage creative and innovative solutions, including opportunities for shared education across sectors, while recognising that the degrees of sharing may be different to reflect local circumstances. Area planning guidance that my Department issued also emphasises the commitment to shared education, highlighting the need for a willingness to develop more opportunities for sharing curricular provision and infrastructure in line with Programme for Government commitments. A number of schools and communities have risen to that challenge, and my officials and I have engaged with a number that are proposing innovative solutions. Those include schools in Fermanagh that wish to explore joint-faith models and schools in Moy that have proposed a single-campus model.

By its nature, shared education provides for a more integrated educational approach that includes integrated schools. It is not a case of one or the other. While doing so, it reflects the desires of parents and communities to maintain the kind of ethos that they value and that many Members referred to in the debate.

We also need to remember that there are many controlled and maintained schools that have mixed intakes from the two main communities, but do not have integrated status. However, in many cases, they have a more representative community balance than some integrated schools. Indeed, during her commentary, Miss McIlveen referred to the number of schools that fell below the religious balance in the guidance

and legislation. I will provide her with a full list of schools and balances, because she posed that question to me. Parents make a conscious choice to send their children to such schools, even where integrated schools are available. The truth is that although some communities are ready to embrace integrated education models, others are identifying alternative shared education models that better suit their local circumstances. What is important is that any proposal must meet the sustainable schools policy, align with area plans and their impact on other schools in the area and, importantly, have the support of parents and the wider community.

We know through experience that imposing solutions on communities simply does not work. Parents vote with their feet when making choices about their children's education.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. In light of the point that he makes about imposing solutions on people, does he not conclude that the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, which places a duty on his Department to facilitate and promote two particular sectors over and above and to the disadvantage of others, is clearly to the detriment of our education system and creates a playing field that is not level?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not accept the Member's interpretation of the provisions that he refers to in relation to Irish-medium and integrated education. Those provisions are there to facilitate and react to demands from communities. The Department does not go into communities and say: you shall have an integrated school or an Irish-medium school. Communities come to the Department and say: we have sufficient numbers to provide for a school of either sector. The community then has to bring forward development proposals, and the Department investigates whether there is sustainable demand.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for giving way. Just for clarification, the order does not say "promote", which would be a highly evocative term. It says "encourage and facilitate".

Mr O'Dowd: I accept that the Member is absolutely correct in his definition of what the order says.

Where the community consensus is to establish an integrated model, the process is already in place to facilitate that. In that regard, I support the general principle to further integration of schools across all sectors, including controlled

and maintained. However, I do not support any implication to make integrated models the only solution. To do so would be to impose solutions on communities. We need to move forward on reacting to and facilitating demand. I agree that there is a greater demand in communities for shared education. Where that leads to fully integrated education, I have no difficulty in supporting that. However, we have to lead, support, encourage and facilitate community demands to move towards shared education.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Let me finish this point and then I will.

Many of the models coming forward under shared education are radical, and they see an entirely new beginning to education within many communities and, indeed, see a new beginning to community attitudes within many of those areas. I think that we should be supportive of them.

I am happy to give way to the Member.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for giving way. He knows that one of the targets in the Programme for Government is to:

"Substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015".

How exactly will he achieve that goal when he is not aware of how many schools currently share facilities?

Mr O'Dowd: Information on that is difficult to ascertain accurately because schools run varying programmes and much of that information is school based. However, one of the drivers towards facilitating shared education will be the shared education report. If we have to carry out an audit to ascertain the exact degree of sharing, what type of sharing is going on and how we can build on it, the Department would be willing to do that. It is a Programme for Government commitment, and I intend to live up to it. There are a number of options available to me, but I have to emphasise that the shared education report is the start of what I would like to see: a robust and informed public debate as to how we move forward with shared education. Then the challenges that the Member presents — there are challenges for my Department in monitoring this — can all be overcome.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for giving way. I am interested to hear him say that there is a rising demand for shared education. Will that be reflected in the Education Bill that he is bringing forward, and does he propose to promote it in the Bill?

Mr O'Dowd: The Bill does not prohibit sharing in education, and it does not replace other legislation that allows for sharing in education. ESA will be tasked with the area planning process, and I see no reason why ESA will not move forward with the similar terms of reference that I have with regard to promoting shared education. There is nothing in the ESA Bill to prevent shared education, and I would argue that there is everything in the ESA Bill to help us to assist in moving forward towards shared education when we have the main educational bodies around the one table in a decision-making body.

I think that I understand the sentiments —

Mr Newton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just give me one second, and then I will.

I understand the sentiments of the motion, although I believe that it can be interpreted in a number of different ways. A number of Members have said that it promotes only integrated education, which the Department cannot do, as there has to be a range of providers out there. I fully support the sentiments behind the motion, although there are concerns about its wording.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for giving way. I take you back to a phrase that you used. You talked about radical plans coming forward, which you were pleased about, and I commented on the lack of planning as I perceive it. Why is it that the only situation that can be perceived in East Belfast is the closure of Dundonald and Orangefield and the merger of Knockbreda and Newtownbreda? Why are the only options being considered? Why is it that you failed to visit the schools prior to the decisions being taken? Why is it only now that you, I hope, are going to listen to what their principals have to say?

Mr O'Dowd: I have not made any decisions in relation to Orangefield, Newtownbreda or Dundonald. I have not been involved in the decision-making process at all, and the reason is this: it is first and foremost a matter for the Belfast Education and Library Board to bring forward a development proposal. If a

development proposal is published around any of those schools, I will, as I have done with all other schools, be happy to meet and engage with political, public and school representatives about those schools. I am not aware of having been invited to any of those schools, although, recently, I received an invitation from a parent support group — I am not going to name the school, because I am not quite sure which school it was — and I have signed off on it in the positive. I am more than happy to visit the school, I am more than happy to engage with the parent support group, and I am more than happy to meet the pupils, because I think that that is the right thing to do. There is no point having a local Administration if our citizens cannot talk directly to the decision-makers. I have no difficulty in engaging with any sector out there or any school anywhere across the areas of my responsibility.

In conclusion, I once again apologise for not being present for the entire debate. I welcome the opportunity to debate and discuss issues such as integrated education. With regard to shared education, I assure the sponsors of the motion that I am serious about integrated education. We have made substantial public resources available to the integrated sector to carry out the work and bring forward proposals in and around the integrated sector and to advance it. However, the final decision-makers as to whether any child will attend an integrated school will be their parents, and I do not think that we can force a choice on them with regard to that matter. Let them be the decision-makers in this. In the realms of wider societal issues, I believe that we are making changes. I believe that the sectors also realise that, even with regard to their own future, the best way forward, not only for education but for the well-being of our entire society, is for greater sharing of resources, facilities and education.

Mr Craig: I support the amendment and find myself, like others in the House, unable to support the motion. We really need to discuss today the whole concept and ideals of parental choice.

I was brought up in an era where parental choice was key in all forms of education. I chose where I sent my children to school, and, ultimately, I made those choices for my own reasons. That leads us to this very hard question: do we believe in parental choice? I find that all political parties tend to pick and choose what they want with regard to parental choice. Others —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Craig: Sorry, Chris.

Others seem to have difficulty around the grammar school sector and the choices that parents make around that. Others seem to have difficulties around the fact that people do not choose integration and the integrated sector, but that is what parental choice is all about. In fact, one of our colleagues in the SDLP raised the issue of faith-based education: parents make choices around that as well, and those choices need to be respected. There are consequences to making parental choices. We are sitting with five sectors in Northern Ireland because of parental choice. That is what our amendment is about. It is not about doing away with the concept of integration and integrated education because that has its place in Northern Ireland. Many parents make the choice to send their children to integrated schools.

5.45 pm

It is interesting that a lot of integrated schools do not meet the Department's criteria. In fact, 28 out of 62 do not. Some of those schools include less than 5% of the other community. It leads us to ask why schools become integrated, and the Chair of the Committee touched on that. Is it for the right reasons? Was it because they believed in the ethos of both communities working together, or was it purely an act of financial survival? I will leave that question open. I think that we all have the wit to know what is going on there. In fact, 32 of those 62 schools have pupils who are predominantly from one community. In this case, they are predominantly Roman Catholic, which is surprising.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. One point that we have failed to comment on in this debate is that the other sectors, particularly the controlled sector, are not integrated but their door is open, whatever religious denomination or persuasion children are. There is no sign across the door of a controlled school that says that Catholics need not apply. In the voluntary sector and in the controlled sector, there is a mix of children from different religious persuasions.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for raising that issue.

I have to ask this: is the integrated sector the only way through which we can deliver mutual

understanding in education? Speaking as a parent, I can say that that is not the case. There are many cross-educational programmes and visits in all sectors. Like many parents, I have had to answer awkward questions from a 10-year-old daughter, such as "What is a nun?" and other questions like that, which were very enlightening. There are classes that work together in different sectors and go to other sectors and join with them. I firmly believe that respect for other faiths is in the teaching ethos of all our schools. An understanding is taught in our schools today about respecting other people's faiths.

Shared education is a different concept altogether. It is about sectors sharing facilities with each other, sharing teachers and sharing resources. In fact, from the area-based plans and some of the hard questions that have been brought up in education, it is abundantly clear that we will not survive the way we are unless there are more shared resources right across the board. That, in itself, will lead to a lot of mutual understanding in those schools, purely because they are on one site and have to speak to one another.

We need to understand that integration is not the only way forward in getting mutual understanding into our education system. That is why, as a party and a group, we cannot support the original motion, which would put one sector at a great advantage over other sectors. That, we feel, is just wrong and improper.

Mr Lunn: We have had a sensible debate, and most people managed to stay on the subject, which is quite unusual in education debates. With one or two honourable exceptions, everybody talked about integrated education.

I did not hear one Member say that they did not support the concept of integrated education. Nor, as far as I can remember, did I hear anybody say that they did not support the concept of parental choice. Jonathan and others said that the purpose of the motion is to promote integrated education above all others and that the Alliance Party is after one school system that is entirely integrated, with people forced into integrated settings to the exclusion of all others. Mr Rogers made a fair point about faith schools, but he has been sitting beside me long enough to know that I support the concept of faith schools. However, there is absolutely no reason why a faith school should not integrate. Bishop McAreavey said — Mr Rogers was sitting beside me at the time — that Catholic schools were just that: they were not schools for Catholics. He also said that he did

not have any problem with the way in which matters of faith were dealt with in integrated schools. So, there is no problem there.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes, sure.

Lord Morrow: The Member directs his point at Mr Rogers, who decided that he wanted to teach in a school that was perceived and understood to be Catholic. If it is then the case that a Catholic school is or is not a faith school — whichever way you want to put it — what is the ethos of that school?

Mr Lunn: If Lord Morrow is asking me to explain the ethos of a Catholic school, he would probably be better to ask somebody who has been through the experience.

Lord Morrow: What is your perception of it?

Mr Lunn: My perception is that the school is faith-based, has a Catholic ethos and there is a Catholic emphasis. Up until two days ago, there was a requirement for a Catholic certificate of education, which, thankfully, has now been partially swept away. I do not believe that I could explain it any better than that, nor do I feel the need to.

I will not have time to go through what everybody said, so I apologise in advance. I will give a few statistics first of all. One or two people mentioned surveys and polls. I think that the Chairman cast a wee bit of doubt on the validity of some of the polls and the fact that they were conducted at party conferences; I think that Mervyn said that. A lot of polls are conducted at party conferences, as we all know. However, the 'Belfast Telegraph' poll, conducted by LucidTalk and commissioned by the IEF, was not, I believe, directed at party conferences.

I will give Members a few statistics from that poll. To the question "Would you support or oppose a request to transform your child's school?" 79% of those who responded were for and only 12% were against. Among the under-45s, the figures were starker; frankly, the younger generation appears to be running ahead of us. On the question "Should integrated schools should be the main model for our education system?" 66% agreed and 18% disagreed. On the question "Is a single education system the best way to deliver education in the future?" — you will love this one — 71% were in favour and 16% were against.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Maybe in a little while. Since the Chairman is asking me to give way, I will mention his comment that he wished that he had more time to discuss the issue — don't we all? He is the Chairman of the body that could make time to discuss this properly. As other Members have said, being limited to five minutes and being told that your time is up and so on is not satisfactory. It is an important topic, and it will not go away. I would certainly support any attempt by the Education Committee to spend a bit of time on this. Now that we have finished with the ESA Bill for the time being and maybe, frankly, for ever — *[Interruption.]* If that is the case, let us be honest and say that we will have time on our hands, so let us talk about something that matters.

There was a lot of talk about shared education as an alternative to integrated education. Some of us just do not see that one is the alternative to the other. When we talk about integrated education, we have in mind the societal benefits of bringing children together at an early age and keeping them together through their education and the benefits that that would bring.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that teaching children in the same building, as shared education does, but giving them different uniforms, teaching them in different classes and having different principals teaches them that their differences are a cause for division, whereas integrated education teaches them that their differences are a cause for celebration?

Mr Lunn: That is a nice way of putting it. He tempts me to comment again about the situation in the Moy. I hope that I do not touch another nerve, in the case of Lord Morrow, but, frankly, the Moy primary school experiment, if I may call it that, is certainly not something that I think will lead anywhere. It is, in fact, accentuating division, not trying to do something about it. Children going into the same school with different uniforms? Where are we going with that? That is not the answer.

Sharing education has its place; I do not discount it completely. Some of the area learning communities work very well. Last year, the Education Committee went to Limavady, where it had a good day and was given a good explanation. It works there because there are a number of successful and sustainable schools in one area that may have had problems delivering the full curriculum. That is what

sharing education was meant to be about initially. It was about allowing schools to deliver their full potential. If a school did not have enough pupils in one class to sustain it, it could combine with another school, and any societal or spin-off benefits would be a bonus. If you read Sir Robert Salisbury's report on the common funding formula, you will see what he thinks of it: he is not at all convinced that it is a long-term bet. It is certainly not a replacement for proper integration.

Before I run out of time, I will refer to one or two things that Members said. Everybody was so positive about the motion that I cannot understand why you are not all supporting it. It was remarkable to hear such support, even from the Ulster Unionists. Like everybody else, Mr Kinahan spent his first two minutes praising the motion and the last three rubbishing it. That is the way it is.

The Chairman, among others, congratulated teachers. I do not know how many times I have stood in the Chamber and congratulated teachers working in any setting. I do not think that there is any need to congratulate teachers in an integrated setting specifically. They are no different from anybody else and get on with their job in very difficult circumstances. Mervyn Storey referred to his experience in Ballymoney. I am sorry that he is not listening to me, but he told us that he is now a governor of an integrated school there. I guess that he is a governor of an integrated school having fought long and hard to prevent that situation coming about.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: OK.

Mr Storey: The reason for that was that the basis on which the school was proposed had nothing to do with integrated education; it was to do with a letter from a parent who said, "I would like to send my child to an integrated school". The school transformed, but what did the parent do? The parent sent the child to the local controlled primary. So it was a numbers game, and it was proposed on the wrong basis.

6.00 pm

Mr Lunn: The Chairman was not the only person to cast doubt on the reason why schools decide to transform; his party colleague who moved the amendment also did so. I do not buy that at all. Maybe somebody could point to one case that had a defensive aspect but not in the cases that I am familiar with. Jonathan

Craig referred to this, but he will be familiar with Fort Hill integrated college in Lisburn: there is no fear of closure there. That is parental choice at its very best, and the motion calls on the Minister to acknowledge that choice. I will not be talking out of school to say that NICIE and IEF will bring forward proposals shortly.

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

Mr Lunn: You said, Minister, that you are prepared to look at those to find some way to ease the process, which is, in your own words, cumbersome.

My time is up, Mr Speaker. I hope that all Members will support the motion.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 71; Noes 23.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Craig and Mrs Hale

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Dickson and Ms Lo

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to acknowledge the expressed wish of parents to see their children educated in accordance with their wishes, including in an integrated setting; urges the Minister to guarantee parity of esteem for all sectors with the establishment of sectoral bodies to support parental choice; and further calls on the Minister to encourage all sectoral bodies to promote the development of a single shared education system based upon equality of treatment for all.

Adjourned at 6.16 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

General Medical Services Contract 2013-14

Published at 12.00 noon on Friday 12 April 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a Statement to the Assembly on the outcome of the consultation on proposed revisions to the General Medical Services Contract for 2013/14.

The General Medical Services (GMS) Contract is a UK-wide contract and has been in operation since April 2004. It was introduced to provide a more flexible delivery of services, improved quality, and more modern infrastructure. It aims to promote better quality and more responsive GP services and at the same time provide an adequate level of remuneration for the profession with incentives for enhanced care. Since its introduction the Contract has delivered significant increases in investment in primary care general medical services, and patients have benefited directly from this investment.

Each year there is a negotiation of revisions to the General Medical Services (GMS) Contract involving the four Health Departments in the UK, the NHS Employers and the General Practitioners Committee (GPC) of the British Medical Association (BMA). Unfortunately, an agreeable settlement was not reached through the national negotiating process last year in regard to changes to the General Medical Services Contract for 2013/14. Since October 2012 each of the four Health Departments in the UK has engaged directly with their respective GPCs on changes to the Contract.

The proposals for changes in Northern Ireland were the subject of a consultation exercise with General Practice which commenced on 29 January 2013 and concluded on 22 March. The proposals included increased levels of investment in General Practice; the delivery of

equitable funding across GP Practices; and amendments to the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the Contract, including the introduction of new National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommendations, and the removal of a number of indicators which were considered to reflect basic standards of good organisational practice.

Following the consultation I am informing the House that agreement was reached with the Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee (NIGPC) on changes for 2013/14. The agreement includes increased investment in General Practice with a 1.5% uplift overall for GP pay and practice expenses, and taking account of the Executive's policy on pay increases. Additional investment will also be made available through the increase in the value of a QOF point such that GP practices have the opportunity to receive through performance achieved against the QOF indicators an additional £3.5m in 2013/14. This investment is being provided on the basis that a detailed analysis will be undertaken with NIGPC of the current and anticipated workloads in General Practice and how practices are organised and prepared to meet effectively and efficiently the challenges, and deliver best value for money from the resources available. The Department and the Health and Social Care Board will be engaging shortly with NIGPC to take forward this review.

The majority of new or replacement clinical indicators as recommended by the NICE will be introduced for 2013/14 and the lower and upper thresholds for 13 existing QOF indicators will be increased for 2013/14 to promote improved quality of care for patients. The increases to the upper thresholds for QOF indicators will be capped next year at 90%. Indicators which related to the organisational arrangements in practices will be discontinued as these indicators basically reflect standards of good organisational practice which should already be in place.

There is a need to ensure that the finite resources available are distributed equitably across practices in line with patient needs. During the consultation exercise some concerns were raised about the potential sustainability of some practices if there was a redistribution of resources through the methodology as set out in the proposals. Following the consultation it has been agreed that work will be undertaken this year with NIGPC on a detailed assessment of the issues and potential implications for individual practices.

We need to have safe, sustainable and resilient health and social care services to meet the needs of the population and to continue to improve the quality of patient care. This is at the core of Transforming Your Care. The agreed changes to the Contract and further work as outlined in this Statement should help support improvements in patient care and services and address the main concerns that were raised by GPs during the consultation. The involvement of General Practice is essential to the successful implementation of Transforming Your Care, the shift in service provision, and the goal of ensuring that all patients and service users receive the right care, at the right time, in the right place and provided by the right person. It is essential that every part of our Health and Social Care services plays a full and active role in achieving the best possible outcomes for patients. GPs have an invaluable contribution to make to this essential reform. I am pleased to acknowledge the support that the Northern Ireland GPC has given to Transforming Your Care and I expect that GPs will play a full and active role in helping now to deliver its effective implementation.



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