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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 22 April 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance about a possible misleading of the House by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. On Tuesday 9 April, the Minister made a statement regarding the extreme weather conditions. After her statement, Mr Ó hOisín from Sinn Féin indicated that the visit:

"gave great succour and reassurance to the farmers of the East Derry and West Tyrone constituencies."

I will set aside the mispronunciation there. I then asked the Minister about her visit, and she said that she had:

"informed all MLAs when I was going into their area".— [Official Report, Vol 83, No 5, p23, col 1].

I then put down a question for written answer to ask how many MLAs had been informed of her visit to the two constituencies. Her reply stated that she notified "all MLAs within that constituency" and outlined only the Members for West Tyrone. I seek your advice, Mr Speaker; perhaps you would look at the Hansard report and inform us as to whether the Minister did mislead the House?

Mr Speaker: Let me say to the Member and the whole House that these issues are sometimes for Ministers themselves, but let me look at Hansard. The Member now has it on the record as well, which is important, but let me look at Hansard and come back to the Member.

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask you, on behalf of the House, to write to the Executive to ask them to show the House and its Members the due dignity that they are to be afforded when they table motions. We, in the Ulster Unionist Party, have tabled a motion for the repeal of the exception for teachers in the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998. We have been informed

that none of the four Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will respond to it, which is nearly as many times within the past few weeks that that Department of the Executive has failed to respond to private Members' motions.

Mr Speaker: I hear the Member's point of order. As the Member knows, although I do all that I can to encourage Ministers to come to the House, and especially to hold the Executive to account, Ministers and the Executive decide this particular issue. I know that the Member has raised the issue with officials and that the Member and his party are quite annoyed because an indication was given that Ministers would be here. Maybe the Member wants to raise the issue with the Business Committee, because that is where it rests. The Business Committee is responsible for preparing the Order Paper, so maybe the Member needs to raise it there at the next meeting of the Business Committee, which is on Tuesday. I understand the Member's annoyance.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: University of Ulster Day Nurseries

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

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Business Office and the Business Committee for facilitating the petition today. I present the petition on behalf of a number of students and staff at the Magee and Jordanstown campuses who are very opposed to the plans by the University of Ulster to close down day-care provision at both campuses. Parents are worried because nursery provision provides a vital social investment in both areas for the future, not only for their children but for future generations of children, and clearly the job losses will have an impact.

I have continually met and spoken to a number of parents in Jordanstown and in and around the city council area of Derry about their worries and concerns about those campuses. Parents believe that the services are vital, and closure would cause them serious inconvenience.

In particular, it occurs to me that, with an increasing emphasis being placed on early years intervention and the need for stronger childcare provision, alongside, in my constituency, the anticipated expansion of the Magee campus, it would be a retrograde step to downgrade the day-care nurseries. I earnestly request that senior management at the University of Ulster look at the proposals again. A key element of the Programme for Government is widening participation, but these proposals will mean that single mothers, in particular, around Belfast and Derry will be more socially disadvantaged and will face a barrier to third-level education.

Mr P Ramsey moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister for Employment and Learning and send a copy to the Chair of the appropriate Committee.

Executive Committee Business

Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

The statutory rule is being made under powers contained in the Energy (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, which prescribes that the order must be laid in draft for approval by affirmative resolution of the Assembly. The changes that I bring forward in the draft order relate to the Northern Ireland renewables obligation (NIRO) and were subject to statutory consultations during 2011 and 2012. Following the consultations, the order introduces important changes to the NIRO that will continue to make it more effective and capable of delivering our targets for renewable electricity at least cost to the consumer.

As Northern Ireland's main policy measure for incentivising renewable electricity generation, it is crucial that the NIRO is able to react to the needs of Northern Ireland while also keeping abreast of developments in the rest of the United Kingdom and beyond. The large majority of proposed changes in the order mirror those contained in the other two renewables obligations in Great Britain. However, it has also been necessary to make some Northern Ireland-specific changes.

The order contains a number of amendments to the NIRO, some of which will take effect from 1 May and others that will come into operation later in the lifetime of the NIRO. Before I go into more detail on the changes, I will put the NIRO's performance to date into perspective.

Since the NIRO's introduction in 2005, consumption of renewable electricity has increased from 3% to just under 14% now. The previous Programme for Government target of 12% by 2012 has been met, and the proposals in this draft order are intended to ensure that we continue on the path to meet the strategic energy framework target of 40% renewable electricity consumption by 2020.

The NIRO has been successful in supporting investment in renewables generation across a range of technologies and sizes. At present,

there are over 1,300 generating stations accredited under the NIRO, with a total installed capacity of 530 MW. Previous amendments to the NIRO reflected changing requirements, such as the need to provide more support to small-scale technologies, and the changes introduced in this latest draft order are intended to reflect present and future changes to technology costs.

The draft order will extend the end date of the NIRO from 2033 to 2037 and bring the NIRO end date into line with the other two renewables obligations in the United Kingdom. Importantly, that will give assurance to Northern Ireland generators accrediting until March 2017 that they will receive the full 20 years' support under the mechanism. Were the NIRO end date not to be extended to 2037, it could have a significant impact on investment potential and jeopardise the overall aims and principles of the NIRO.

The NIRO consultation included a proposal in line with the other two renewables obligations to introduce transition arrangements for combined heat and power (CHP) projects, which would see the ending of the half renewables obligation certificate (ROC) uplift for such projects after 31 March 2015. Instead, projects that accredit after this date would be required to take the relevant ROC level for electricity-only generation together with the relevant renewable heat incentive (RHI) tariff in place at that time.

Work is under way in Northern Ireland to determine an appropriate RHI tariff for biomass over 1MW. Although that is intended to be in place by 1 April 2015, my Department is unlikely to be in a position to consult on the proposed tariff before mid-2013. That presents a difficulty for large scale biomass CHP projects already in development or nearing financial close, which may accredit after 1 April 2015 but do not have a clear indication now of the appropriate RHI support level that will be available at that time. It is for that reason that the draft order will introduce a six-month extension until 30 September 2015 for CHP projects accrediting under the NIRO. To be eligible for the grace period, projects must be commissioned and accredited under the NIRO by 30 September 2015.

At present, electricity generated from landfill gas is second only to onshore wind. Support for this technology in Great Britain, where it is a well-established and mature technology, has now ended. However, there are still potential generation opportunities for landfill gas projects in Northern Ireland, which by their nature are smaller in size with fewer economies of scale

and, therefore, require continued support. The draft order, therefore, retains the current one ROC support for open and closed landfill sites until 31 March 2015. There is, however, a case for continued support beyond 2015 to improve methane collection and electricity generation at closed landfill sites based on the additional costs for those projects. As such, and consistent with the other two renewables obligations, my Department intends to provide support at 0.2 ROCs per MW hour for generating stations that are accrediting or adding capacity from 1 April 2015 and which use gas from closed landfill sites only.

Waste heat to power generates further electricity from landfill gas through an organic Rankine cycle process, giving up to 10% higher efficiency. It is particularly suited for sites such as landfill, where CHP is not an option as there is no local heat customer. The fitting of waste heat to power on new and existing landfill sites could be a cost-effective way of contributing to our renewables target and would also make the most efficient use of landfill gas resource.

In line with the rest of the UK, we have decided to introduce support at 0.1 ROCs per MW hour for electricity generated by new waste heat to power from landfill gas. That support will be available for waste heat to power fitted after 31 March 2015 to existing stations as well as new stations using gas from any landfill site.

I now want to focus on the other key amendments that are consistent across all three renewables obligations following a UK-wide review of ROC banding levels.

12.15 pm

I am sure that Members agree that it should not be the Government's policy to support renewables at any price and that renewables should ultimately become competitive without the need for subsidy. The banding review and subsequent amendments in the order will reduce support where that can be done while bringing on the deployment that we need from key technologies, such as offshore and onshore wind and biomass, to achieve our aims.

As Members will be aware, in October 2012, the Crown Estate awarded the development rights for three offshore renewable energy sites in Northern Ireland's coastal waters. One of those development sites is for a 600 megawatt offshore wind farm located off the County Down coast. That represents a major milestone for Northern Ireland. Across the UK, the level of support for offshore wind is set at 2 ROCs for each megawatt hour in 2014-15, reducing to

1.9 ROCs in 2015-16 and 1.8 ROCs in 2016-17. That is consistent with consultation proposals and reflects the expectation that the costs of offshore wind will fall as mass deployment takes place and industry innovates. The new support levels will ensure that the UK as a whole retains its position as the world's leading location for offshore wind deployment.

Onshore wind is one of the most cost-effective forms of renewable electricity generation. In Northern Ireland, we benefit from some of the highest wind speeds in Europe. Therefore, onshore wind will continue to play a key role as part of a diverse energy mix. In line with the rest of the UK and supported by evidence of falling technology costs, I propose to reduce by 10% support for large-scale projects over 5 megawatts to 0.9 ROCs for each megawatt hour for new developments accrediting from 1 May 2013.

The evidence that has been gathered as part of the banding review has also shown that costs could be falling faster than expected. The Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) has undertaken a UK-wide call for evidence on potential falling costs. If the call for evidence confirms significant change in costs and I am satisfied that that reflects the Northern Ireland position, along with the other United Kingdom Administrations, my Department will review onshore wind support rates again. Any new arrangements arising from a potential review would not take effect before April 2014. Financially committed projects would be protected through grandfathering and grace periods.

I propose to continue to support our small-scale onshore wind generators by retaining the current level of 4 ROCs for stations generating up to 250 kilowatts and 2 ROCs for stations generating above 250 kilowatts up to 5 megawatts. However, in my Department's response to the most recent NIRO consultation, which was issued in January, I have given a commitment that we will review all small-scale banding levels in 2013-14 with the intention of introducing any changes in April 2015.

In line with the other two renewables obligations, we are establishing two separate bands for solar photovoltaic (PV) under the NIRO. New bands will be introduced from 1 May for building-mounted and ground-mounted solar PV stations. Both bands will apply to stations generating above 250 kilowatts. I want a solar industry in Northern Ireland that grows in a sustainable way and that does not result in the same issues of overcompensation that have occurred recently in Great Britain.

Evidence that has been gathered at a UK level has shown that there has been a significant reduction in solar PV costs over recent years. I have therefore set lower support levels to reflect that fall. From 1 May, ground-mounted solar PV above 250 kilowatts will receive 1.6 ROCs for each megawatt hour, reducing to 1.4 ROCs in 2014-15, 1.3 ROCs in 2015-16 and 1.2 ROCs in 2016-17. From 1 May, building-mounted solar PV above 250 kilowatts will receive 1.7 ROCs for each megawatt hour, reducing to 1.6 ROCs in 2014-15, 1.4 ROCs in 2015-16 and 1.4 ROCs in 2016-17. ROC levels for building-mounted and ground-mounted solar PV generating stations up to 50 kilowatts will continue to receive 4 ROCs for each megawatt hour, and stations above 50 kilowatts up to 250 kilowatts will continue to receive 2 ROCs.

As I mentioned, I have given a commitment to review all small-scale banding levels over the next year. However, if evidence shows that the current support levels are not sustainable, I will instruct my officials to carry out an early review under a mechanism that is set out in article 31 of the Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009.

The NIRO will continue to support innovative technologies that can play a long-term role in our energy future, including innovative processes for generating electricity from waste, such as anaerobic digestion (AD) and advanced conversion technologies (ACTs). AD above 5 MW and ACTs will continue to receive two ROCs in 2013-14 and 2014-15. Support will then reduce to 1.9 ROCs in 2015-16 and 1.8 ROCs in 2016-17, in line with our aim to reduce subsidies over time. ROC levels for AD up to 5 MW will be considered as part of a small-scale review, which I mentioned.

I previously referred to the three new offshore renewable energy sites in our coastal waters. Two of the sites are for tidal stream energy and are situated off Torr Head and Fair Head. Each will accommodate 100 MW. I am sure that Members will welcome the news that support for wave and tidal stream technologies will increase from two ROCs to five ROCs from 1 May this year. That level of support will be available for generating stations with an installed capacity of up to 30 MW, above which support reduces to two ROCs.

In conclusion, the amendments in the order are designed to ensure that we support renewable electricity generation at a level that continues to provide investor certainty — I hope that I have achieved that today through what I have stated — while maintaining value for money for the customer.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an ráitis a thug sí dúinn ar maidin. I thank the Minister for her detailed account.

The current Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, as did the previous Committee, has closely followed the evolution of the Northern Ireland renewables obligation through the Renewables Obligation Order (Northern Ireland) 2009 and its amending orders in 2010 and 2011. The Committee recognises the importance of the NIRO and its impact on the development of both large- and small-scale renewable energy installations. I listened very carefully as the Minister outlined that. I also listened very carefully when she mentioned a review of the small-scale projects. The Committee looks forward to that review and to its detail and content on the provision of renewables and the incentives for the industry.

It is essential that the appropriate levels of support be offered in order to meet the targets that the Department set in the strategic energy framework. It is equally important that renewable generation not be over-incentivised, so that full value is achieved from the public purse.

The Committee considered the Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 at SL1 stage on 24 January and subsequently considered the draft statutory rule on 8 April. The Committee is content that the amendments proposed are appropriate and therefore agrees that the 2013 order be affirmed by the Assembly. Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair and the Committee for their work on the order. It introduces further changes, some of which are Northern Ireland-specific. It shows that, when the House has an opportunity to look at specific measures for Northern Ireland, it does so and puts forward proposals based on evidence. That is what has been achieved by this piece of work. I hope that the measures proposed today will help ensure that we have more electricity generation from a wide range of renewable sources; that we increase our security of supply, which is another of our key objectives in the sustainable energy framework; and that we contribute to the United Kingdom's obligations in Europe.

It is a balancing act to incentivise those technologies but not overcompensate. That is why we need to keep this at the forefront of

energy policy. I thank the House, and I thank the Chair of the Committee for his input.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Teachers: Employment Law

Mr 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 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Kinahan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that the exception in fair employment law allowing discrimination on the grounds of religious belief when appointing teachers is now over 35 years old; further notes that the same exemption, uniquely written into European anti-discrimination employment law (directive 2000/78/EC), suggests that it is designed to further "the reconciliation of historical divisions"; the Equality Commission recommendation for its withdrawal in 2004 in respect of secondary school appointments and earlier in its entirety has not been put into effect, nor has any proposed monitoring been introduced; the Department of Education's equal opportunities policy for teachers (TNC 2009/2) now prohibits controlled schools from so discriminating; and calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to repeal the exception to ensure equal opportunity and that school teaching staff reflect our religious and ethnic diversity.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today in what I hope will be a healthy debate that will send the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) a clear instruction to put right an inequality that should have been addressed years ago. I will start with an observation: it is totally reprehensible that there is no ministerial response to the debate, and I hope that the Speaker will follow what he has been asked to do by our Whip.

The motion should not conjure up fear or suspicion. It should be an issue that truly unites the House. How can any political party that claims to be committed to equality be content to oversee an over-discrimination in how our teachers are recruited? It cannot, because that would be rank hypocrisy.

Before I get into the detail behind the motion, I will quickly pay tribute to one of my party colleagues, Jeff Dudgeon. He is no stranger to championing equality in Northern Ireland and, once again, has played a pivotal role in

supporting today's motion. He also happens to be a renowned bugbear to Departments, which, for whatever reason, believe that they can get away with withholding public information. I also thank Austen Morgan, a barrister at the London and Northern Ireland Bar, who has proved invaluable in casting his expert legal opinion on the matter. I am pleased to say that both men are in the Public Gallery for the debate, and I encourage any Member to approach them at the end and engage with them further on the topic.

I will provide a very quick background to the debate. To apply for teaching posts in Catholic maintained nursery and primary schools, applicants must possess a recognised religious education certificate. That certificate is supposed to ensure that teachers in Catholic maintained schools have an understanding of the Church, its teaching and way of life to enable them to contribute to the maintenance of the ethos of the school and to assist parents in educating their children in the faith according to the principles of Catholic education.

That appears to be all very noble, but should every single primary school teacher in the maintained sector require it? The answer is clearly no. I will explain later what I propose as an alternative. For many people, the requirement for primary school teachers in our single biggest sector to hold a certificate that effectively eliminates up to half the potential workforce sounds grossly discriminatory, and that is because it is. It was discriminatory in the PSNI, and it is discriminatory in our education system.

In 1976, Parliament exempted employment as a teacher in a school from anti-discriminatory legislation. That is the so-called teachers' exemption. In 2000, when the European Union provided for general anti-discriminatory law, supposedly to improve labour flexibility in a single market, the UK secured a continuing Northern Ireland opt-out in the directive permitting religious discrimination — that is, it allowed religious discrimination. Rather than it being something that we can be proud of, the fact that teachers in Northern Ireland are the only occupational group in 27 member states to be legally unprotected should bring a huge degree of shame to our equality laws.

The teacher exception is now nearly 40 years old and was to be abolished a decade ago, in all secondary schools at least, in the long-forgotten single equality Bill. The two Equality Commission reports of 2000 and 2004, which were written because of the review obligation inserted into the Fair Employment (Northern

Ireland) Act 1976, were followed by the commission saying that reform was needed. Article 15 of Council directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000, establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, says that the teachers' exemption should remain:

"In order to maintain a balance of opportunity in employment for teachers".

What a contradictory statement: trying to keep the discrimination law in order to balance opportunities for teachers, when half of them are excluded. I strongly believe that writing the exception into EU law in 2000 was an exercise in deception. It is long over time that it was reversed.

12.30 pm

At least when the education and library board circular TNC 2009/2 on equal opportunities for teachers in schools was issued four years ago, the exception ceased to apply for all controlled schools. The circular stated up front, in paragraph 2.1, that:

"The aim of this policy is to communicate the commitment of ... the Board ... to the promotion of equality of opportunity. It is the policy of the Board and the Board of Governors to provide employment equality to all irrespective of "

—inter alia —

"religious belief and political opinion."

Even if discrimination on grounds of religion in the appointment of teachers was still permissible, it had become a disciplinary matter for any appointment panel so to do. That was a welcome move, but, again, it was not necessarily being followed.

Last December, the Minister stated that the education and library boards told his Department that they do not monitor the composition of teachers, applicants for employment or appointments in controlled schools on the basis of religious belief and political opinion as there is no statutory obligation to do so. However, he went on to say that the boards are aware of the requirement detailed in that circular. So we do not even know the extent of the current balance of opportunity, as the monitoring of teacher appointments promised in the same circular never actually happened.

It is clear that this whole area is in desperate need of reform. Whilst OFMDFM may cower away from its responsibilities, I believe that the task comes down to us, the Assembly, to change it. That is why I am pleased to say that, on top of the huge number of other areas in the Education Bill that need amending, I intend to table a raft of amendments to remove this exception. Again, I pay thanks to Austin for his invaluable support in that regard.

For anyone who believes that removing the exception is some sort of attack on the ethos of CCMS schools, they are wrong. I am well aware of the important role that the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) primary school teachers play in the preparation of young people for communion, for instance, and the excellent education throughout. Whilst I am going to make judgement on that in either way, I do propose that some protection remain in place for CCMS schools. In my amendments to the Education Bill, I will propose up to 20% of teaching jobs for the teaching of religion in various ways. That one-in-five rule would be similar to what is already the case in England through the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

In conclusion, I urge all of us in the Chamber today to really consider whether discrimination in the employment of our teachers is something to be proud of. The young people whom our education system is responsible for are becoming increasingly diverse, and yet we still have old, draconian laws in place. I was pleased to see recent moves by CCMS to open up its schools a little bit. However, if it does not go further than just a three-year stopgap, unfortunately those moves will be seen as little more than gestures.

While some parties may talk a good game on their vision for a single education system, the fact that neither the DUP leader nor any of the other three Executive Ministers in OFMDFM could be bothered even to respond to the debate shows how insincere they really are on the matter. I hope, though, that the Education Minister is listening to the debate, for whilst the responsibility to change it may lie with OFMDFM, he should realise that his silence on the issue is the equivalent of his complacency.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): The motion refers to equality in employment and education. By way of informing the House and with your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will take a few moments to advise of the Committee's recent deliberations on the matter.

The Committee has only recently received the Department of Education's report on the review of the employment opportunities for teaching staff, including the assessment of the equality impact on the religious certificate requirement. Whether this House agrees or disagrees, as the report finds, some non-Catholics clearly view the requirement to possess the certificate for religious education as a bar to employment in the Catholic maintained primary school sector. The report suggests that there is no statistical evidence of an adverse impact on employment opportunities for newly qualified non-Catholic teachers. Nonetheless, the Department suggests that CCMS should consider the limiting of the requirement to designated posts only in the primary and nursery sector.

As Chair, I point out that some members of the Committee do not view the certificate as necessarily discriminatory. They accept the Department's findings that there is no evidence of material disadvantage. The majority of members of the Committee highlighted that they have considerable concerns about the continued insistence of CCMS that teachers in Catholic maintained primary schools be required to obtain the certificate of religious education. The majority of members feel that the present arrangements are unfair and represent a significant inequality. These members felt that the approach of CCMS is particularly unhelpful, given the need for flexibility on all sides in the face of primary school area planning. The majority of members believe that cross-sectoral amalgamations and enhanced sharing between schools can only be hampered by what some have described as this unfair employment practice. We have invited CCMS to the Committee to brief us on the current consultation.

I move from Chair of the Education Committee to make remarks as a Member of this House and the DUP's education spokesperson. If the Members who drafted the motion had used a bit of intelligence rather than trying simply to get something onto the Order Paper, they might have included not only OFMDFM but the Minister of Education. I see that the motion's proposer has disappeared from the Chamber. Clearly, no Minister was to come to the House because the Minister who is responsible for recruitment is the Minister of Education. We put in an amendment along those lines, and, unfortunately, that amendment was not accepted.

Let us get to the core of this issue. It is absolutely and totally unacceptable that any organisation is allowed to discriminate in the way in which this practice has been going on for

the past 40 years. Let us not try to dress it up, and let us not try to hide it. At the core of this is one sector that wants to, by all means and all methods, ensure that it protects its own sector. I raised this issue repeatedly in this House. In fact, I raised it with the deputy First Minister back in 2009. The deputy First Minister used the phrase that this was:

"lawful discrimination on the grounds of religious belief".

Would that have been acceptable to nationalists and republicans in this House in relation to recruitment for the RUC and the PSNI? Nationalists insisted that there had to be 50:50 and that there had to be equality, but it is all right when you are protecting a sector and your own schools to ensure that you deliberately and lawfully discriminate.

I pay tribute to the non-Catholic teachers who are in the maintained sector, some of whom I know personally and some who are related to me. They do an exceptionally good job, but I know many others who are very unhappy and very uneasy about the issue of the Catholic certificate. Even today, when we have the publication from a shared education working group, it is abundantly clear that old habits do not die easily. The sectors, particularly, in this case, the maintained sector, want to talk a good talk —

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

Mr Storey: — and want to talk about equality and want everybody else to jump the hurdles, but they do not allow anybody else to play the game the same way as they do. We support the motion, albeit with reservations about its limitations.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion. I am delighted that the Ulster Unionist Party has finally seen fit to include terms such as "equality" and "equal opportunity" in its educational discourse.

The recent decision taken by CCMS to formally amend its current policy that all teachers seeking appointment to a Catholic maintained primary school must hold, by date of appointment, a certificate in teaching Catholic religious education is to be welcomed. The amendment enables all teachers, irrespective of their perceived religious background, to be considered for Catholic maintained schools, subject to a commitment to acquire the Catholic

certificate within three years. Moreover, the move by CCMS to open talks with St Mary's University College and senior trustees of Catholic schools in order to review the range of courses and the creation of equitable pathways to acquiring any new certificate is proof that progress is indeed being made in relation to moving beyond the need for such an exception.

In recent weeks, the House has examined the future cohesion of our education system, and perhaps today's motion is a pertinent extension of that debate, given that many have viewed the fair employment exception as an inevitable consequence of an education system that permits and promotes separate denominational schools. It is salient, however, to stress that any proposed repeal of the exception will not be the silver bullet that some believe it may be in addressing the ongoing legacy of a sectoral education system or, indeed, any polarised teaching workforce. I was interested to read in the Equality Commission's recent report on the exception that connected research carried out by Seamus Dunn and Tony Gallagher outlined a wide variety of factors contributing to such a polarised teaching workforce. The reasons, of course, included the requirement to have a certificate in teaching religious education but also emphasised deep-seated societal divisions, perceptions of the influence of the various churches in some schools, lack of a desire among teachers to move outside the tradition in which they themselves were educated and the long-established practice of some schools of employing a majority from one community. We must recognise that, should the exception be totally removed, many of those factors will not change, nor will the additional fact that many of our schools are located in areas aligned to a particular political tradition.

I will make one final point, which I alluded to at the outset of my speech. I welcome the language from the opposite Benches in relation to the need to tackle such perceived inequalities in our system and to do more to provide equality of opportunity. We do not hear that enough from those sitting opposite. Where is that language when the House discusses academic selection, Irish-medium education or, indeed, wider societal issues such as marriage equality or the rights of ex-prisoners to equal employment opportunity? Indeed, I look forward to the debate next week on marriage equality to see whether the Members on the Benches opposite will be so excited in their pursuit of fair treatment and equal opportunity.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hazzard: No, I just want to finish this off. No doubt, I would be wise not to hold my breath.

Mr Storey: Will you give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. The answer is quite obviously no. The Member should not persist. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Member to finish.

Mr Hazzard: Sinn Féin does not support the continuation of the exception and calls on the Education Minister and OFMDFM to take forward proposals for the removal of the exception under article 71 of the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998, following the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority. That approach would not only provide a basis to open dialogue with key interest groups but would give both sides of the debate ample opportunity to put forward their views and concerns in a neutral environment.

Mr Rogers: Today's debate gives us the opportunity to discuss how we can strengthen our employment laws, particularly when it comes to the appointment of our teachers. Equal opportunities for people across society must be incorporated into revised legislation that takes into account European anti-discrimination employment laws. As a former principal, I have had first-hand experience of the contribution that our teachers make to a broad range of educational issues. Our teachers are real asset in a society that is increasingly diverse in religion and ethnicity.

The SDLP is a strong advocate of parental choice when it comes to the selection of a school, and it equally wants to see student teachers able to apply for jobs in the full range of educational sectors, whether it be Catholic, controlled, integrated, Irish-medium or whatever. I welcome the publication of the Department's review of the certificate in religious education, which is a mandatory requirement for those seeking employment in a permanent teaching post in a Catholic maintained nursery or primary school.

12.45 pm

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member not find it strange that the review was announced in 2009 — we are now in 2013, four years on — and what we got back was hardly worth the paper it was written on? Given the seriousness of the issue, it lets you see that the Department and the Minister

responsible are not taking the issue very seriously.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Member for his intervention.

Initial teacher education for the primary sector is provided by three institutions: St Mary's; the University of Ulster, where there is easy access to the certificate; and Stranmillis, where the certificate can be obtained through a distance learning course. The review points to potential barriers that Stranmillis students may face when it comes to the distance learning course, including lack of awareness; lack of information about the course; the need to pay fees up front; the additional time commitment; and the lack of support and resources available. Few students studying at Stranmillis appear to choose to obtain the certificate, but there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that that has affected the employment opportunities of Stranmillis graduates.

I welcome the removal of barriers for any aspiring teacher, and the review sets out how that can be achieved. It includes improving awareness and understanding of certificate requirements; improved information on distance learning at Stranmillis; re-examining the provision of fees; and consideration of obtaining the certificate through a partnership arrangement between Stranmillis and St Mary's.

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

The certificate in religious education was never designed to be an exclusive ticket to employment or to exclude talented student teachers. The Catholic maintained sector uses the additional training to equip teachers working in nursery or primary schools with the ability to conduct religious education classes in a thorough manner against the background of a Christian ethos. In addition, at primary level, sacramental preparation is an important part of the religious education curriculum. The sacraments of reconciliation and Holy Communion take place in P3 or P4, and confirmation takes place in P7. In many schools, there are information sessions for parents so that they can deepen their own faith and help to accompany their children in preparation for the sacraments of encounter. They are not only school events but family and community events.

There is less need for the certificate in post-primary education, as not all teachers teach religion. However, I would still encourage our students to complete it as it gives them greater

flexibility for employment and retaining employment in a contracting environment. During my time as a teacher and as a principal in the Catholic sector, I observed the tireless work done in Catholic schools during the worst years of the Troubles to shield children from sectarianism and bigotry. Religious education classes incorporate the study of world religions and help young people to understand difference. Visiting our other Christian churches takes place across the sectors. Throughout my career and in working closely with neighbouring controlled schools, I saw that teachers in those schools showed a similar dedication to the promotion of tolerance. It is wonderful to see children from different schools and backgrounds engaging and learning from one another. I never experienced the segregated ethos that some people talk about.

I believe that it is a positive step to encourage those students at Stranmillis to avail themselves of the certificate if it enhances their profile and broadens their choices when applying for work. For the Assembly, our goal must be to ensure that children across the North have access to a first-rate education system and that our teachers are equipped to deal with a diverse range of pupils and to promote the principles of tolerance and respect in whatever setting. Hence, the SDLP will not support the motion. It is not discriminatory to expect our teachers, who play a major role in faith formation, to have the right qualifications and skills.

Mr Lyttle: As a member of the Alliance Party, which is clear in its support for increased integration in our education system, I support the motion. I am acutely aware of the ongoing debate on education in Northern Ireland, which I believe is not always helped by political parties engaging in the politics of misrepresentation, manipulation and retreating to narrow sectoral interests. Alliance Party support for integrated education has been misrepresented as being anti-parental choice and anti-faith or for forced integration and secularisation of education. That is plainly false. It is about helping to give the 80% of parents who would like to select integrated education for their children more than 6% of our schools from which to choose. Many integrated schools across Northern Ireland facilitate excellent religious education and instruction when appropriate, and, in that context, there should be no need for an explicit exemption in fair employment legislation.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate the approach of the Member and his party to integrated education, so does he find it unacceptable that Phoenix Integrated Primary

School recently advertised a teaching post for which one of the essential criteria was that the applicant possess a Catholic teaching certificate?

Mr Lyttle: Certainly. I think that everyone knows that we are not without troubles with the Catholic religious education certificate, and I may develop that as I go along.

My party believes that fair employment exemption is a much broader provision than required, and, as I have said, a connected issue is the requirement for a certificate of religious education. I appreciate that the rationale is that pastoral care, preparation for sacraments and ethos are believed to be an essential part of the educational experience, but the exemption allows schools to discriminate on the basis of religion when recruiting. So even if you support the requirement for a certificate in religious education — I think that there are problems with that — the fair employment exemption is excessive. There is also a genuine occupational requirement in existing equality law that allows organisations a basis for making a credible defence against alleged discrimination, and it is possible to refer to that provision.

Alliance will argue that any professionally trained teacher, irrespective of their background, should be capable of teaching in any school, even one with a specific religious ethos. Our aim should be to train teachers in a shared and integrated environment and prepare them as one to teach in a range of settings. All teachers should have a sufficient blend in their training to adapt and teach in all potential circumstances. That is not anti-choice or anti-faith.

Alliance recognises that there will continue to be a range of sectors in Northern Ireland for the foreseeable future. We must, however, promote greater integration in our education system. There are clear reasons and clear support for integrated education and collaboration between sectors in the delivery of education.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Storey: The Member is saying that there needs to be greater integration, but does he not think that it would be better starting with the integrated movement, given that 45% of its schools have a majority of one community or

the other? Maybe the integrated sector would be a good place to start.

Mr Lyttle: I disagree with the Member if he is trying to make an argument that the integrated sector is not integrated. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Mr Lyttle: The integrated manner of delivery in our integrated schools is absolutely first-class. In this context, all teachers should have a broad understanding, and Alliance believes that fair employment exemption is much broader than necessary and supports the call from the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take the action necessary to amend the legislation.

Mr Craig: It will come as no surprise to the House that I support the motion's call for the removal of the Catholic certificate. Indeed, it was I who raised the question with CCMS and the Catholic bishops when they appeared before the Committee. I thought that I was going to go down in history as the person who caused one bishop in particular to have a major heart attack and that I would go down famously in my community for having done so.

What I find alarming is that this reinforces discrimination, but it is not the first time that I have seen discrimination reinforced in legislation, going against the whole ethos of equality and all the rest of the things that others in the House are supposed to champion. We have seen it in the past. We saw it in 50:50 recruitment to the PSNI, and we see it continue with the Catholic certificate. Members can rant to their heart's content about the ease of access to training for the Catholic certificate.

I listened with interest to what a colleague said about teachers having to be part of the preparation for the sacraments. It will come as no surprise to anyone in the House that there are those of my faith and others who will find that such preparation goes against their moral background and will not be prepared to do it. So, it is a discriminatory issue for a teacher. I still have to ask myself this basic question: if you are a maths teacher, for instance, what relevance does the Catholic certificate have for you at all? What is the Catholic ethos behind maths? I think that that one would be lost on all of us. A maths teacher is a maths teacher, no matter their religious background.

We must put all this into perspective. If I came to the House to propose a Protestant certificate for teachers in the controlled sector, I know

what the response of 90% of the House would be. Why do we then have an exemption in the equality legislation not only in Northern Ireland but in Europe, that so-called bastion of equality for all? That goes to the heart of all this.

My former party leader would probably be proud of what I am saying, because he knows the truth about religious liberty. There are those who have double standards. This is one of the relics of the double standard that we have left on the equality of treatment for all who teach in schools. It is an issue for many teachers in the education sector. Many have approached me asking why it is allowed to continue and why it is reinforced not only here but in other jurisdictions, with them and their beliefs being discriminated against. It should stop. That is why I firmly support the motion. I have no issue with looking forward to the day and hour that this is changed. Let us see that equality of opportunity for all.

Statistics on the issue are hard to find, because others choose to bury them. However, recent statistics show that over 50% of employment opportunities in education in Northern Ireland this year lie in the maintained sector. For all those who, for their own personal reasons, cannot and will not sign up to the Catholic certificate, that means that they are discriminated against. It must stop, and the sooner it stops, the better.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members on the opposite Benches for bringing the motion to the Floor. Having carefully read it and having listened to the proposer and, indeed, to others, I think that it is quite clear that this exemption to fair employment law has long outlived its sell-by date. OFMDFM tasked the Equality Commission with reviewing the issue in 2004, but, some years later, we are just getting round to the idea of debating it.

The Equality Commission's view would be that teachers should, in the foreseeable future, be included in religious discrimination legislation and that further restriction of the teachers' exemption to teachers in mainstream primary schools should be effected in the single equality legislation, with a particular view to extending the protection that exists on the grounds of religion to include all teachers from all sectors in any of its reviews of duties and monitoring. It cannot continue to exclude the entire teaching workforce from the fair employment legislative provisions that cover all occupations here.

Our society and education system are growing in culture, tradition and diversity. Our education

system provides for children from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The same opportunity should be given to those who want to teach in those schools, and it should be inclusive of all. The Equality Commission's investigation was a detailed piece of work that highlighted a range of opinions across the sectors on recruitment practices. My party welcomes the CCMS's decision to amend its policy so that teachers can, if it is their choice, teach in other sectors and be afforded the opportunity of time to do that.

The review carried out by Professor Tony Gallagher and Professor Seamus Dunn suggests that more work needs to be concluded to effect the change, mainly as a result of the complexity of the issue, that support for the change is often a minority opinion. I believe that the Equality Commission's recommendations for developing a new single equality Bill will go before OFMDFM, and that is where the change to legislation will be made. As the Chair of the Education Committee said, the CCMS will brief the Committee on the issue, and I look forward to that briefing. There should be equality of opportunity in the sector. I support the motion.

1.00 pm

Mr Eastwood: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am probably not really known for my strict adherence to the Catholic Church, and I may not be as closely associated with the Church as some of my colleagues, but it strikes me that the issue is not about discrimination but about logic. If I wanted to become a football coach and coach kids on how to become better footballers, I would have to get a certificate. I would have to be qualified in that field. If we accept that parents have a choice of the education that they want their children to have, that faith-based education is part of our education make-up and that parents should have the opportunity to send their children to a faith-based school, if they want to, the logic is that the teachers teaching in those schools, particularly those in primary schools, where they go through the sacraments, should have some form of qualification in that regard. That is the basis of our position.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: No, I will not. You had plenty of time, and I am sure that you will come in again before the end of the debate.

It is absolutely hilarious to hear the other side of the House talk about equality for all and use the types of phrases that we do not hear from those Benches. We do not hear it; we never hear it. This is the first time in a debate that I have been involved in that the DUP, in particular, has talked about equality, fair employment, equal opportunities and equal rights for everybody. It never happens, so I am suspicious that it seems to happen around the one thing that the Catholic Church or Catholic education is involved with. I never heard you talk about it through all the years of the old RUC or the old Stormont, when it routinely and en masse discriminated against Catholic people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: No, I will not give way to the Chairman of the Committee.

It is important to note that the CCMS has begun an evolutionary process in which it is willing to make changes, but I do not think that that should be done arbitrarily by a Department. Mr Rogers made this important point: we need to ensure that people have the opportunity to avail themselves of the certificate. The recent study of the supposed inequality states that the qualitative evidence suggests that the majority of the particular cohort would not apply for posts in the Catholic maintained sector for other reasons. Maybe there are societal reasons why people are not interested in applying for certain positions. It is a bigger issue than merely the certificate.

Mr Kinahan said that he would be prepared to table amendments to the Education Bill. We will look at those amendments when we see them. The fact is that they are not covered in the motion, so we cannot act on them. However, I look forward to seeing those amendments. Our position is clear, and it is a position of logic: to be a teacher in a Catholic school and to provide a very important part of Catholic education, you would, I imagine, need to have some form of qualification in that regard.

Mrs Dobson: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter. Like Danny, I thank Jeff Dudgeon and Austen Morgan, who join us in the Public Gallery for the debate, for all of their hard work.

The motion does not call for anything that people should get themselves alarmed about or something that is undeliverable. It simply puts right a long-standing wrong in the current

system. Apart from trainee teachers and those who are currently applying for teaching posts, few others would actually notice. The Catholic certificate may have its purpose, but to require all applicants to all teaching positions in CCMS primary and nursery schools to hold it is, at best, discriminatory and, at worst, outright sectarian. The fact that the exception remains in European law today, in 2013, should serve as a huge discredit to those who like to proclaim that the EU is there to protect human rights and stamp out discrimination. No other part of the continent of Europe has had need of such a draconian and total exception in any area of employment. Of 27 states, with all their varying pressures and challenging eccentricities, Northern Ireland remains the only one where discrimination in the employment of teachers does not even need to be veiled and is actively promoted.

For as long as the exception is in place, how can the House really expect shared education to break out into its next phase? We cannot look to the future with confidence while blatant discrimination remains enshrined in law. Sharing is about much more than facilities; it is also about teachers. How can we expect that to happen formally as long as the requirement for the certificate remains? Those are the considerations that may not have been considered a decade ago when the issue was last looked at.

What the Ulster Unionist Party calls for is not total removal of Catholic training for Catholic teachers but removal of the obligation to have it for 80% of teaching posts in maintained schools. Danny has already indicated our plans to amend the Education Bill to remove the exception. I believe that we have found a reasonable compromise for CCMS in the one-in-five rule. If that is still not enough to assure people, schools will have the additional protection of article 4 of the EU directive of 2000.

Mr Craig: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: Yes.

Mr Craig: Can the Member outline where exactly in the Bill it actually states anything about the Catholic certificate? I had to raise the issue with the bishops because my reading of the Bill was that it was not there and I was curious to see why it was not there to reverse it. Part of the problem is that I do not see anything in the Bill that actually reverses that discrimination.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is why my party is tabling amendments.

The directive states:

"in the case of occupational activities within churches and other public or private organisations the ethos of which is based on religion or belief, a difference of treatment based on a person's religion or belief shall not constitute discrimination where, by reason of the nature of these activities or of the context in which they are carried out, a person's religion or belief constitute a genuine, legitimate and justified occupational requirement, having regard to the organisation's ethos."

As in the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, everywhere else in Europe, their interests will be protected further by the concluding provision of article 4, which states:

"Provided that its provisions are otherwise complied with, this Directive shall thus not prejudice the right of churches and other public or private organisations, the ethos of which is based on religion or belief, acting in conformity with national constitutions and laws, to require individuals working for them to act in good faith and with loyalty to the organisation's ethos."

Therefore, it is clear that the removal of the teachers' exception should pose no risk whatsoever to the ethos of any school here.

Our education system reflects the rich diversity of cultures in Northern Ireland. If you walk into any school, you will hear accents from all around the world. There is absolutely no reason why our teachers should not reflect that rich diversity.

Mr Allister: For decades, it was peddled around the world that Northern Ireland was a place of rampant discrimination — *[Interruption.]* — particularly against the Catholic community.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. If Members wish to have conversations, it is not meant to be in the Chamber.

Mr Allister: Thank you.

It was peddled around the world that Northern Ireland was this place of rampant discrimination, particularly against Catholics. Of course, we have had legislation on this very topic of discrimination since 1976. The supreme irony and the fact is that, since 1976, the only lawful discrimination that has been permitted in Northern Ireland has been against Protestants, first of all in respect of the 50:50 discriminatory rule in police recruitment and, for decades now, this overtly discriminatory requirement for a certificate of Catholic education if you want to teach in the maintained sector. So, the truth is often different from the fiction that is peddled, and the fiction that has been peddled around the world perishes on this rock, as it does on so many other rocks of truth. The reality is that the only discrimination lawfully permitted here has indeed been against Protestants. The question for all in the House is whether they have any appetite or willingness to address that. Do Members, particularly those who were the chief peddlers around the world of the notion of discrimination in Northern Ireland, have any intention of grasping the nettle? It seems that the party of John Hume, chief proponent of Northern Ireland as a place of discrimination, is not prepared to address the issue. Indeed, we heard Mr Eastwood make the ludicrous suggestion that retaining the certificate was all a matter of logic. Well, I am sorry. As Mr Craig asked in the debate, where is the Catholicism that must be protected in the teaching of mathematics, geography, English, IT and so on? I could go on. There is none. So, this shield that the certificate is supposed to be is a fiction, because it is not necessary to protect the ethos of Catholic schools. In the very select area of the teaching of religious education there may be a case for selection of teachers on a very particular basis but not on the generality that is being applied across the board. There can be no justification for clinging to the certificate.

This is a basic issue of equality. It is a matter of regret that the Department with responsibility for equality — OFMDFM — is absent from here today. Indeed, in response to a variety of questions on this very topic, some from me and some from others, the Department indicated that it had no inclination or intention to ever address this inequality.

I suppose it is not here because the likelihood is that it cannot agree about this, yet we had a contribution from Sinn Féin in this House today saying that it supports the motion. If it supports the motion, what are its Ministers in OFMDFM doing about it? If the DUP supports the motion, why can that collection of Ministers not do something about it? I think one has to test the

delivery of that Department on the affirmations that we have heard today. I suspect it would be found very far wanting.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Allister: I support the motion. It is the right thing to do, and it should have been done years ago.

1.15 pm

Mr Agnew: I declare an interest as a director of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education. I support the motion on behalf of the Green Party. For us, it is very much a question of equality in employment. Mr Allister made a point about discrimination against Protestants. For me, this is about discrimination against all non-Catholics. I would like to widen it out from a two-traditions debate. We are a diverse society and many people are excluded due to this exemption from fair employment laws.

Mr Eastwood made the point that this was not a question of equality or discrimination, but of logic. I can follow that line of argument, and I anticipated it being made, but the fact that this exemption is required suggests that it is about more than logic because any employer can discriminate on the grounds of suitability for the post. If this is simply about candidates being suitable to teach in a school that has a Catholic ethos, that can be part of the admissibility criteria within law. It is the willingness to discriminate outside the law and therefore seek an exemption from the law that is key to this for me. If it was simply about logic and suitability for a post, we would have no problem and there would be no need for any exemption. That is why I am absolutely certain that the exemption needs to be removed.

We have further human rights laws that allow freedom of religion, and there can be different ways that our courts look at the laws around these issues. We have seen these laws being challenged when it comes to discrimination against homosexuals. That is why I am surprised by the SDLP's position, because religion could not be used to discriminate in employment or the provision of goods and services when it came to another section of our society: gay people. Again, if this was a question of logic, we could justify it within our existing human rights frameworks and religious freedoms without having a specific exemption.

I question the role of religion in schools.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I would like to hear his views on an experience that I had last week. A person wanted to apply for a teaching post in the integrated sector, but the advertisement clearly stipulated that they must have the Catholic certificate of education. Does the Member accept that that is a very raw discrimination and that that sort of practice should be stopped?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Agnew: In order to try to seek equality, there is a series of monitoring and, in some cases, proactive recruitment in the integrated sector. I do not defend everything in the integrated sector, but I support it as a whole because it has gone a huge way to educating our children together and to ensure that, while we acknowledge difference in our society, we recognise that that difference does not need to be a reason for division.

I come back to the point made by the Chair of the Committee, Mr Storey, about whether there is complete religious equality across every integrated school. Integration is about more than just having balance. A number of Catholic maintained schools in my constituency have a large Protestant intake, but they are not integrated in name or nature because, ultimately, they retain a religious ethos that is exclusionary. That is the difference; integrated education brings together children of different religions. It does not matter about the proportions; what matters is that we teach those children to respect difference, challenge sectarianism —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Yes.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for commenting on the issue, but does he not accept that the integrated system is built on the basis of a legal requirement to have a percentage from the other community? I said to the Member from East Belfast, who dodged the issue, that it is a fact that 45% of schools in the integrated sector have a majority of either Catholics or Protestants.

Mr Agnew: The Member's colleague the Minister for Social Development has not challenged or changed the division and segregation in our housing system. Inevitably, integrated schools are in divided sections of our community, because that is how our housing is. Integrated schools are a solution to that

problem, but we need a solution on housing. The housing Minister is failing to tackle that.

The role of religion in Northern Ireland is a very sensitive issue. However, as I said, while we need to teach respect for difference, we need to understand that difference does not have to be a cause for division. We, in the House and in the Executive, must challenge that division at every turn and do all that we can to make sure that we have a genuinely shared future in Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: I very much welcome the debate and congratulate my colleagues Jo-Anne Dobson and Danny Kinahan on bringing it to the House. I also thank all the Members who have contributed to the debate over the course of the past hour.

Of course, I had hoped to be following a ministerial response today. I echo the sentiments that were expressed by Danny Kinahan: it is a matter of deep regret that, despite the fact that OFMDFM has no fewer than four Ministers, all of whom the Business Committee was told would be available today, none has made it to the House. It is not just today. A fortnight ago, the SDLP brought forward a motion calling for the return of the Civic Forum. Again, OFMDFM was unable to supply even one of the four Ministers to make a response.

Sadly, it has to be recorded in Hansard that the apparent disrespect for the House extends to Committees. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has had a run of four consecutive weeks when we have suffered late papers or the cancellation of briefings by officials. On 6 March and 13 March, papers arrived very late. Those were papers regarding the delivery by OFMDFM of its Programme for Government commitments, so it was core business, and yet some papers arrived just two hours before a Committee meeting. On 20 March, officials who had been due to brief the Committee on the child poverty action annual report cancelled, and, on 10 April, officials again cancelled briefing the Committee on the older people's strategy.

We are debating equality in the context of education, hence the reference to OFMDFM. It might be useful to give some context to the motion. During the debate, mention was made of the single equality Bill. The options for that Bill were consulted on during direct rule. The Minister with responsibility for equality, John Spellar MP, issued a report as long ago as 2005, summarising the responses received. Those responses indicated a significant support

for harmonising existing anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland. In response to a question for written answer that was tabled by my colleague Robin Swann in September last year, the First Minister and deputy First Minister said that they had no plans to develop a single equality Bill here. The repeal of the certificate could easily be done as part of taking forward a single equality Bill.

With regard to a sexual orientation strategy, on 17 September 2012, junior Minister Bell gave the Assembly a:

"confirmation to have that draft ready and out for consultation by the end of 2012." — [Official Report, Vol 77, No 3, p28, col 1].

Yet again, that strategy has not come forward from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

As we heard, you cannot acquire the certificate of religious education at Stranmillis directly. Students there have to take a distance learning course from Glasgow University that leads on to the certificate. A small number of students from Stranmillis do so, and this is funded by the Department for Employment and Learning. Therefore, we have a situation in which all the necessary teaching and support to gain employment in the maintained sector is offered by one of our university colleges, while students at the other college must undertake a distance learning course to get the same qualification.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that I assume that he is expressing a concern to protect teachers in the controlled sector, will he explain to the House why his party and his previous party leader, Lord Empey, aided, abetted and assisted the removal of the transferors from the board of governors of Stranmillis College? That has left that college with no representation from the Protestant Churches. Perhaps, in the interests of equality, he might revisit that issue.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. There is much in the past that we could look to, Mr Storey. There is much that we could talk about in terms of policies reversed, Mr Storey. We learn in politics that never, never, never is not necessarily what it is said to be.

Students at Stranmillis are at a clear disadvantage. When it comes to finding a teaching position, graduates from St Mary's can take up a post in any primary school in Northern Ireland as they will have that certificate.

In a statement to the House on teacher training on 28 November 2011, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Stephen Farry, outlined:

"The situation could be addressed either through measures to remove the capacity for schools to require the certificate or through ensuring fairer and more ready access for students to the certificate across all institutions." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 69, p78, col 1].

That is another example of discrimination in the area of teachers gaining employment through a lack of equality of opportunity.

In opening the debate, Mr Kinahan thanked Jeff Dudgeon and Austen Morgan for their sterling work in highlighting this issue. I want to do the same. Mr Kinahan took us through the history of the issue and alerted us of his intention to table an amendment to the Education Bill to address the issue. He also said that, in that amendment, he will offer protection so that 20% of teaching jobs would require the teaching certificate: the so-called one-in-five rule that is consistent with the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 in England.

As Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Storey said that some Committee members reject the notion that the certificate is discriminatory but that the majority feel that it is unhelpful, especially with the move to more work in area planning. As the DUP education spokesman, he felt that the focus should be on the Minister of Education as much as on OFMDFM, even though the Member will be aware that equality falls within the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. He supported the motion, even though he was at pains to articulate that the DUP's amendment had been rejected.

For Sinn Féin, Mr Hazzard said that he welcomed the Ulster Unionist Party bringing equality into its thinking and language. I must get Mr Hazzard a copy of the Belfast Agreement, or perhaps direct him to the policies of Lord Londonderry, Northern Ireland's first Minister of Education in 1921. Mr Hazzard seemed more concerned with ex-prisoners and same-sex marriage, but in the end he said that he would support the motion.

For the SDLP, Sean Rogers said that he wished to praise our teachers as an asset in an increasingly multicultural society. He made the point that Stranmillis offers only distance learning for the course. He also stressed the importance of sacramental issues and

preparations, which would be protected by the one-in-five rule that Mr Kinahan proposes. Despite that, he said that the SDLP will not support the motion.

Chris Lyttle said that the Alliance Party supports the motion. He began by defining his party's position. He then took an intervention from my colleague Tom Elliott, who had discovered an integrated primary school that had advertised a job for which the certificate was essential. Mr Lyttle conceded that there are issues with the certificate. He spoke in favour of greater integration and collaboration between sectors. Mr Storey intervened to point out that the make-up of the integrated sector was not that well balanced.

1.30 pm

Mr Craig highlighted moral issues surrounding sacramental teachings and questioned the relevance of the Catholic certificate to the teaching of mathematics. Our call for a single education system should not be perceived as a threat to the Catholic ethos. If there is something about that ethos in Catholic maintained schools that is good for their pupils, why should we not all want it for all our children?

Michaela Boyle said that the certificate had long outlived its sell-by date and gave a rare acknowledgment of the need for a single equality Bill. Mr Colum Eastwood said that the issue was not about discrimination but logic and made a comparison with a football coach, ignoring the one-in-five rule that we propose. He also seemed to find some hilarity in the debate that escaped other Members.

Jo-Anne Dobson highlighted the fact that teachers in Northern Ireland are the only occupational group in the 27 member states of the European Union to be legally unprotected. She also quoted from article 4 of the 2000 directive, which requires individuals who work for organisations to act in good faith and with loyalty to that organisation's ethos.

Mr Allister questioned whether the House had the appetite to address misrepresentation regarding alleged discrimination throughout the years. Mr Agnew highlighted the fact that there was a willingness to discriminate outside the law.

What we propose is not an attack on any sector or any group, nor is it the outright removal of the certificate. It is a move towards equality, with the protection of the one-in-five rule that Mr Kinahan outlined. It is a small step towards a

single education system and a very important step towards full and proper equality. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes that the exception in fair employment law allowing discrimination on the grounds of religious belief when appointing teachers is now over 35 years old; further notes that the same exemption, uniquely written into European anti-discrimination employment law (directive 2000/78/EC), suggests that it is designed to further "the reconciliation of historical divisions"; the Equality Commission recommendation for its withdrawal in 2004 in respect of secondary school appointments and earlier in its entirety has not been put into effect, nor has any proposed monitoring been introduced; the Department of Education's equal opportunities policy for teachers (TNC 2009/2) now prohibits controlled schools from so discriminating; and calls on the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to repeal the exception to ensure equal opportunity and that school teaching staff reflect our religious and ethnic diversity.

Special Needs Provision: Further Education and Training

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

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of provision for individuals with severe learning difficulties leaving special needs education at 19 years of age; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to expand the provision of support staff and develop the assistance needed to encourage the uptake of further education and training, thereby allowing more engagement with society.

I am pleased to propose the motion standing in my name and that of Mr Weir. I was going to welcome the Minister, but I see that he is not here. I do not know whether that is an indication that he is not coming. Maybe he is. I am not sure, but we will return to that subject in any event.

Mr Lyttle: He is.

Lord Morrow: I have been assured that he is coming. I welcome that and look forward to hearing what he has to say in response to this important matter. I also very much look forward to hearing what all MLAs who are listed to speak have to say on the issue.

The matter for debate touches all our lives in some way — some more directly than others. I trust that the motion will receive universal support and that the House will unite behind it to send a strong message that the Assembly, the Minister and the Executive are ready to tackle these important issues, close gaps and make provision where it is obvious that it is required. I have spoken to my Chief Whip, who indicated that he does not expect the House to divide on the motion. Since he seldom gets these things wrong, I am prepared to take his word for that. I look forward to a positive outcome. However, we will not count our chickens before they hatch; we will wait for the outcome.

At this juncture, let me pay tribute to all those who work in special needs. I believe that there is something that sets them apart as they devote their energies and determination to furthering inclusion and equality. The professional approach that they apply is to be admired, and it strikes me that it is a calling for the dedicated few. I simply say to them: well done. Those of us who are in the Assembly, or, indeed, in any other elected forum, have a duty to ensure that we are ready to respond and to take those issues forward on their behalf, as, indeed, we are attempting to do today.

Young adults with special needs had been forgotten to some degree, and, indeed, they were sometimes ignored. I trust that, as a result of today's debate, that will change. Regrettably, there has been a failure of duty of care. Failure to protect and adequately provide for the vulnerable is discrimination and a gross breach of equality. I challenge anyone who would seek to dress up the situation in fancy language to detract from or smooth over the situation. If you examine it closely, you will see that it cannot be done.

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People recently released a report, which I will quote directly from:

"Transitions to adult services for young people with learning disabilities have long been identified as a particular issue and there is a clear history of attempts to address the associated difficulties ...

Nonetheless, young people with learning disabilities continue to encounter significant difficulties on transition from school".

It also states:

"Young people with learning disabilities and their families do not always receive appropriate information about the options and support available to them on leaving school. Nor is there a statutory obligation on a public body to take young people's views into account in decision making processes."

I think that it is important that young people's views are taken into account.

The commissioner also states that there are concerns that are centred on the lack of support for the young person with special needs who is attending a further education course. There is also a lack of genuine options and subsequent opportunities for progression when the course comes to an end. There are no specific statutory obligations to support those young people on transition into further education and from that into employment. In the context of employment, there is variation across Northern Ireland in supported employment opportunities, the availability of suitable work experience placements and the impacts of part-time working on social security benefits.

I am sure that Members will agree with me that we have a serious problem that needs to be urgently addressed. It seems that the matter has ever been with us. It was neglected under direct rule, so we have a duty to ensure that it is remedied under our watch. Indeed, I hope that Northern Ireland will take a leadership role on that and become a model of excellence for the rest of the United Kingdom and other regions. Research shows that we are trailing drastically behind the rest of Europe.

If one looks at section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which many in the House put a lot of emphasis on from time to time, one sees that there are nine identified key groups of persons who could be at risk of discrimination. One of them is a person with a disability. I will quote NI Direct, which states:

"Government departments, agencies and councils take into account Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, which lists nine key groups that must be given consideration before any decisions are made."

On equality, it states:

"equality of opportunity' which means that everyone in society should be able to compete on equal terms. All government departments, agencies and councils must also give the nine key groups 'due regard' when creating a policy."

I am of the opinion that, when applying that test to providing for the requirements of 19-year-olds who have special needs, failure is, unfortunately, the only conclusion that I can come to.

Turning to my constituency of Fermanagh and South Tyrone and to Dungannon in particular, we see that there is a need there. If we compare ourselves with our nearest neighbours, whether in Armagh, Cookstown or Omagh, which appear to be functioning much better, we are left wondering why Dungannon is, as it appears to be, the poor relation in all that.

Therefore, it would be fair to say that a young person with special needs who leaves education at 19 in Dungannon, for example, is, to put it moderately, disadvantaged. I know that many others are experiencing similar circumstances.

Children with special needs attend the same school from the age of three until they are around 19. To attend one facility for the best part of 16 years represents a significant section of life spent in one environment. Having reached that stage, many people are facing a stark future.

Most people who are in and around 18 or 19 years of age are moving into further education, training or employment, marking an important stage in growing up and moving on. However, for some people with special needs, in many circumstances there is virtually nothing for them. That flies in the face of many directives.

Equality is much talked about in the House, as I said earlier. There is seldom a debate, whatever the motion might be, in which the word equality is not used at some time. A young person with special needs has exactly the same rights to access further education, training and suitable employment as anyone else.

Lifelong learning is a vastly promoted initiative, but there is only limited scope for young people with special needs, even though there is a statutory duty to provide equal provision to young adults with special needs. It is time for the Minister to take the appropriate action. He and his party are adamant that equality is a

cornerstone of their strategy, so here is a prime opportunity to demonstrate their commitment.

As I said, section 75 lists people with disabilities as one of the nine groups that are likely to face discrimination and therefore should be among our main priorities to address. Having discussed these matters at length with parents, carers, teachers, support workers and — most importantly — young adults with special needs, I am aware that they face a continuing struggle to be accepted by society as equals.

When efforts are made to progress matters, there follows a flurry of paperwork and interminable meetings and discussions to decide whether there is an issue. That is followed by work on who will take the issue forward, seek funding and prepare case studies. Suddenly, time has passed and little has been done as the years fly by.

Many areas, Dungannon included, simply do not have time for that. The situation has been permitted to develop into a serious problem that needs to be addressed urgently. I am not satisfied that the Department is doing enough to fulfil its remit on young people with special needs. With the correct steering, all the young people could be supported to find out what they want to, and can, do.

Businesses must be encouraged to offer placements and, where possible, employ young people with special needs. Some radical thinking is needed to offer incentives to businesses to engage more young people with special needs. Further education colleges must open their doors —

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

Lord Morrow: Further education colleges must open their doors and welcome young adults with special needs to the concept of lifelong learning, just as they do for everyone else.

I would like to have said much more, but as you have reminded me, Mr Deputy Speaker, my time is up.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I am pleased to speak in this debate as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning on behalf of the Committee. I thank the Members who tabled this timely motion.

The Committee has been considering the issue of post-19 special educational needs (SEN) provision in recent months and has been active in corresponding with Committees and Departments.

At its meeting on 16 January 2013, the Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Education requesting information on the current policy and future plans for post-19 SEN provision from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). At its meeting on 20 February, the Committee for Employment and Learning considered its response to that request, and members raised their concerns about the matter.

The Committee agreed that it was an important issue that merited its full consideration. It has agreed to write to the post-19 SEN provision lobby group to engage with it on the issues and to write to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Disability Action for information and assistance.

At its meeting on 20 February, the Committee for Employment and Learning noted correspondence from the Committee for Education seeking information from DEL on its input into the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP). The Committee forwarded that correspondence to the Department and has noted with interest that DEL representatives sit on the transition to adulthood of children and young people with disabilities subgroup — a group that accepts that the current co-ordination of support and services for children and young people with disabilities is lacking.

Given the Committee's concern about these matters, it has agreed to look more closely at the issues involved. To that end, it has scheduled a briefing from the post-19 SEN lobby on 15 May and from the Department on the post-19 SEN provision for 2013. I thank Members for bringing this matter to the Committee.

1.45 pm

I speak now in my personal capacity as a member of the Ulster Unionist Party and as the party's employment and learning spokesperson. In Northern Ireland, there is an urgent need for the provision of educational opportunities for young people with severe learning difficulties and, indeed, those with profound and multiple learning difficulties on leaving school at 19. From talking regularly to the parents of autistic young people, I can only conclude that more

provision needs to be put in place to cater for special needs teenagers once they reach the age of 19. In supporting the motion, I call on the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide the opportunities and support necessary to ensure that young people leaving special needs schools at the ages of 16 and over 19 can further their education and aspire to meaningful employment.

For an individual to be able to embrace the transition from school to a post-school environment, a firm foundation must be built. In that regard, I warmly praise the work of special schools across the Province. In my North Antrim constituency for example, we have the excellent Castle Tower School in Ballymena. The dedication and passion of staff in such schools must be acknowledged, as must the volunteers who Lord Morrow referred to. I visited that school on Friday after an invitation was extended by the chair of its board of governors, Rev Dr Coulter, an individual well known to the House. One of the issues that he raised was the transition problem. It is most welcome that DEL sits on the transition subgroup for young people, because that is the problem that teachers and parents in that area highlighted most.

It is interesting to note — and Lord Morrow raised the point — that the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Young People highlighted that there are persistent failures in the available transition services. These are people, such as those afflicted by autism, who remain in a special school until they are 19 years of age. When they reach 19, they are not able to move on to further education or employment and are left in their parents' care. Their only outlet is to go to a day-care centre, if that option is even available.

There is something that the House can do, and it was highlighted to me during a recent visit to Stranmillis University College. In England, recent Government proposals will extend education assessment and legal protection from birth until age 25. As part of the UK, we should follow that lead. In September 2012, draft legislation on the reform of provision for children and young people with special educational needs was presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education. It is hoped that that will form part of the Children and Families Bill to be introduced in early 2013. It will include a single assessment process from birth to age 25 that is more streamlined; involves children, young people and families more effectively; is completed quickly; and replaces the current statement with an education health and care plan that aims to

bring services together and focuses on improving outcomes. Legal protection offered through the education health and care plan will be extended to young people over 16 in further education. I encourage the Minister to follow that avenue.

As has been said on a number of occasions, this is not a matter for one Department. The problem is surely one that cuts across Departments and must be tackled together with a team effort.

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

Mr Swann: Together, we can enhance the lives of those young people in need of our help so that each child can achieve their full potential. I support the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion and thank Lord Morrow for bringing it forward. I recently attended a meeting in Sperrinview Special School, Dungannon. I, with others, listened to parents talk about their journey. There was a lot of tears and emotion. I take this opportunity to thank those parents for the courage that they showed in sharing their stories. I commend the parents on their continuous efforts to fight for equality and equal opportunities for their young people.

I also attended an event with the Barnardo's young people's participation project Don't Box Me In. That highlighted the issues that young people with disabilities experience when they move from childhood to adulthood. Those young people delivered a truly profound message that it is when they step out of that labelled box that their abilities begin to be recognised fully. One in five people in the North has a disability. Working With Diversity NI states that the figures are increasing and estimates that, each week, two babies are born with some form of learning disability. The labour force survey in the North found that 53.9% of people with a disability are economically inactive.

The Bamford monitoring group, reporting for the Patient and Client Council, produced the 'My Day, My Way' research paper, which investigated the views and experiences of people with learning disabilities and their parents or carers.

The paper states that choices beyond transition for people with learning disabilities do not really exist. It is simply a matter of fitting in with the available provision. Education courses are limited, and some people have spent several years in college repeating the same courses.

The report goes on to state that there are few opportunities to secure paid employment and that those people who are availing themselves of day opportunities are afraid to question access to placements for fear of not receiving any. Some are even fearful that, if they give up one day in the day centre to explore alternative activities, it may not be replaced if the alternative activities do not work out.

Other issues arising from research papers for people with disabilities flag up a lack of real or meaningful engagement with employers. Those with learning disabilities who had employment were employed on a voluntary basis. There was also the issue of entitlement to benefits and paid employment, which needs to be further delved into. Going into part-time employment would have a significant impact on entitlement to benefits. As everyone knows, employment has to be reasonably paid.

In a research paper by Julie Jamieson, it has been flagged up that the biggest fear for parents and carers is who will look after the children when they are gone. One of the key messages from the Julie Jamieson report is that ongoing stimulating and meaningful educational input into the lives of young people with severe learning disabilities is essential to their personal development and progress towards independence.

Recommendations from the Equal Lives report, in 2005, and the Bamford report have been recognised by health trusts. Recommendations have indicated the need for a wider use of a range of community-based opportunities, options for those with learning disabilities and a reduced reliance on the traditional adult day centre.

In the Children's Commissioner's report, it was stated that further education (FE) college provision differs from campus to campus. The Equal Lives report expressed concerns at the lack of available options after school and the lack of progression from FE provision, students not being able to gain accredited awards from their study, the lack of links with job training and work experience, and students repeating the same course.

The Bamford report identified that young people with learning disabilities across the five colleges indicated that they would like more choice in college, including the ability to choose courses for themselves. The Children's Commissioner, in her research, found that parents and children identified the lack of choice in FE as a real issue.

The Children's Commissioner also expressed concern about the educational opportunities available to young people with severe and profound learning disabilities. Most of those young people attend day centres, and, while there are a number of activities, they do not have an educational focus. Research shows that, while many young people aspire to have a job, opportunities for achieving full-time work are limited. The Children's Commissioner's report also showed that people with learning disabilities have raised concerns that they are expected to work for nothing or for considerably less than others.

I welcome the Access to Success strategy to widen participation in higher education, introduced by the Employment and Learning Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw her remarks to a close, please.

Ms McGahan: Although the Minister has outlined a range of programmes to address the employment opportunities for young people with disabilities, it is important that there is engagement with young people, especially in my constituency.

Finally, I suggest to the Minister that we need to do a closer inspection of FE colleges to ensure that resources are properly utilised and directed —

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

Ms McGahan: — to students with severe learning disabilities to ensure that they get suitable jobs when they leave college.

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

Mr P Ramsey: I commend the Members who have brought this hugely important subject to the Floor.

I am chair of the all-party group on learning disability. It is a hugely important matter for so many across the community. Maurice spoke at the beginning about radical thinking. It is necessary to have very creative thinking outside the box. I am a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, which, as the Chair outlined, has had a not in education, employment or training (NEETs) inquiry. That clearly outlined the difficulties experienced by young people in trying to secure employment. Unfortunately, the greater likelihood is that those with special needs, particularly learning difficulties, are four times

less likely to secure employment than other young people who have some form of education. I am trying to remember where I got that figure.

I note that the Minister has announced a new strategy today: a guide for parents for future career plans. That, clearly, is most welcome, and one wonders where it has been until now. I attended an event in Stormont last week in the Long Gallery with Positive Futures, prior to which we listened to a number of parents talk about their greatest worries as they grow older. Bronwyn hit it on the head. They are saying publicly that they want their child to die before they do. Their point is that, if they have the opportunity for employment, it helps to deliver greater independence for them going forward and helps them immensely. Unfortunately, those in our community who have learning disabilities are more disadvantaged and face greater obstacles. Minister, I say that deliberately to you. I strongly welcome the paper that you brought today. I have only seen the headlines, but certainly —

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Ramsey: I certainly will.

Ms S Ramsey: Lord Morrow is right to bring the debate, and it is important that a number of Ministers take responsibility for the issue, when you are talking about that transition period, including the likes of the Department for Regional Development (DRD) for transport. The Health Committee recently put forward a recommendation for a Minister and Department for children and young people. Do you think that this is an opportune time, when parties are now negotiating the Departments and Ministries, to send a message from the House and call for a Department for children and young people?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr P Ramsey: The mover of the motion made some very sincere comments on radical thinking. Even though we have devolved government in Northern Ireland, we are bad at collaborative work. There is not that important cross-departmental approach that takes place in Scotland and Wales, and there are lessons to be learned. During the NEETs inquiry, we did some study visits to Wales and Scotland and clearly identified better approaches to economic development, to young people in training and to employment need.

In my constituency, I deal on a daily basis with parents, guardians or kinship carers who find themselves in the position of looking after somebody in their community. It is the most worrying and distressing time when that person becomes 19 years of age and, in their opinion, they are abandoned by the state. They feel terribly let down, and there is nothing for them. There is no directed approach, and, in many instances — I say this to the Minister as well — in my constituency, parents have had to take the lead and try to secure employment or training for those people. Parents have had to take a lead in trying to get their youngster — it is always their wean — some placement, because, at the back of every parent's mind, they want to do their best for their child. Unfortunately, we have let down so many generations of young people in the past, who have been abandoned by the state.

I strongly believe that this is one of the most important matters that we could ever discuss, but it is also one of the most important subject matters to deal with in the most proactive way. I take Sue Ramsey's point. Somebody in the Executive should have the mandate to more meaningfully give hope to those parents who spoke in the Long Gallery in Stormont last week. Their child is the best in the world and they love their child, but many a parent said at the meeting last week that they would prefer their child to die first. They said that because, if the child does not die and the parents grow older, they do not have the same strength or energy to look after the child, and if they pass on, will that child go into an institution?

It is about early intervention. It is important, Minister, that you are listening very closely to the debate and can give some hope to the many hundreds, if not thousands, in Northern Ireland whose children, unfortunately, have severe learning disabilities. It is an important matter for this House —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr P Ramsey: — but it is also important that, as a result of the debate today, the Minister, separate to the announcement that he has made — I certainly welcome careers for young people — comes through with other proposals.

2.00 pm

Mr Lyttle: I thank those who tabled the motion for bringing this to the House today. I do not always agree with the motions that Lord Morrow's party brings before the House, but this

is certainly one to unite the House and focus all our minds on the challenges that are ahead.

Like other Members, I begin by paying tribute to all the parents, and the action groups that exist in the community, who are lobbying and working tirelessly, day and night, to get proper provision for people with learning disabilities on the agenda. I am thinking, for example, of the Equal Lives Action Group. As a member of the all-party group on learning disability, I know of the fantastic organisations that are involved with that group.

My party absolutely recognises and values every member of our community. In our recent document, 'For Everyone', we set out our vision for a truly shared society, where nowhere is out of bounds to anyone because of their creed, colour, gender, sexual orientation or disability. That applies not just to geographical locations but to ensuring that access to services and rights are fully available to all, guaranteeing that everyone has the same opportunity to contribute and participate fully in our community and is treated fairly and with respect.

There is some excellent work and provision for individuals with severe learning difficulties exiting special needs education at the age of 19. However, it is clear that a huge amount of work is still to be done. Indeed, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People has set out persistent failures in the transitioning of young people with a learning disability into adulthood.

In my role as a member of the Employment and Learning Committee and MLA for East Belfast, I have seen at first hand much of the good work that is carried out. I am thinking of the work at the Edgcumbe centre and the Orchardville Society, and projects by the Big Lottery. The Department for Employment and Learning does, I know, provide advice and guidance for those leaving special education at the age of 19 who want to access higher and further education and technical training or to move into full-time employment. I look forward to hearing more about the services that are available to our young people today.

Numerous partnerships with providers have been established by the Department for Employment and Learning working alongside community sector organisations. Whilst all that is indeed positive work, there is much more that can be done on a collaborative, cross-departmental basis, as other Members have mentioned today.

I think that we need to see Departments working together to ensure the full implementation of the Executive's disability strategy, which was launched in February of this year. Within that disability strategy, the Executive are committed to transforming the process of transition to adulthood for young people with disabilities, and I sincerely hope that they will not be found wanting in that regard. I am sure that the Employment and Learning Minister will undertake that his Department works tirelessly to ensure that it happens. Today's debate is an extremely useful way of ensuring that the Assembly is fully aware of the challenges that young people with learning disabilities face, to ensure that we advocate on their behalf and hold the Executive to account for that action.

In closing, I again pay tribute to the many people carrying out work related to this issue and those who avail themselves of the services that they provide in order to be vital members of our community. It is important that we continue to ensure that every member of our community has the adequate resources that they need to achieve their full potential.

Mr Storey: At the outset, I commend my colleague Lord Morrow for securing the debate on an issue that all Members have said is of grave importance. I commend the Chair of the all-party working group for the work that it has done in relation to the issue. If there is one clarion call that needs to go out from the House today, it is around the issue of collaboration and joined-up thinking, which is probably little in evidence sometimes when it comes to how many of these things are put into practice.

As part of its ongoing consideration of related matters, the Education Committee received a briefing on the review of special educational needs provision. And hold onto your seats for this: that was back in June 2012. Snails move quicker, I think, than the Department of Education sometimes does.

Subsequently, we learned that the Education Minister had produced a draft Executive paper that proposes the extension of young people's statements of special educational needs to include further and higher education up to the age of 24. I welcome the Minister and thank him for being part of today's debate. If he is in possession of that information, will he update us on where that paper is at?

Like many in the House, I would expect that the proposal that was mentioned is designed to smooth the path for young people with special educational needs during their transition from

post-primary school, thereby encouraging the uptake of further education and training. The Committee for Education further learned in January this year that further and higher education colleges and universities believe that special educational needs statements are not an accurate reflection of students' educational support needs post 19. Colleges and universities contended that existing arrangements or assessment procedures in further and higher education establishments were more appropriate for students with SEN and were more reflective of the provision and support available to those students.

The Committee pursued, with other Departments, the issue of transition — the Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning referred to that — and second-level education. As the House will be aware, the Health and Social Care Board established the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, which has brought together a number of sectors with a view to improving outcomes for young people in Northern Ireland. The Department of Education contributes to that development through the draft action plan, which is out for consultation. The draft plan for the subgroup on transition to adulthood of young people with disabilities recommends, among other things, a passport linked to an individual integrated plan for disabled young people, the tracking of SEN students at school and beyond and the development of a cross-departmental commissioning process to ensure that all students have equal access to transition services.

I note that the draft action plan from the subgroup recommends taking forward a model for full-service schools, which is to enhance co-operation across agencies and sectors for SEN pupils as they progress through their education. Given that the Minister is present, it is the right place to ask him whether he will give a commitment to draw down funding from the European social fund, for example, to establish programmes across Northern Ireland that can then be allocated to the relevant agencies for the delivery of services for the category of young person that we are discussing and debating today. As was rightly said, society is judged on how it treats and cares for the vulnerable. I fear that, as a society, we are poorly judged when it comes to offering adequate support and provision for adults and young people who have special needs. I trust, therefore, that the issues that are raised in the debate will not just form part of another Hansard record but will be translated into meaningful and purposeful outcomes that will

be to the benefit of our young people. I support the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion being debated in the House today, and I commend and thank its sponsors for tabling what is a timely motion on a crucial issue on which we all want improvement. Many Members highlighted the problem, and I do not intend to repeat that. I will spend a few minutes focusing on possible solutions, and, to do that, it will be beneficial to stop and take a look at the programmes that are on offer for the people who are referred to in the motion, for those who are not in education, employment or training and, in particular, for those with a disability. It will be useful for the Minister to take the opportunity when he responds to the debate to provide clarity for all of us on what provision is actually on offer for those with special needs.

The Minister well knows some of my concerns about the proposed Steps to Work scheme and my fear that it will not help to get people back to work. All it will do is hand lucrative incentives to private firms to help people to get jobs that exist already. Such a scheme will not create any new jobs. As part of the Minister's response to the debate, I would like to hear what consideration has been given to implementing a community employment-led scheme, which could have at its heart a major emphasis on getting jobs for people with special needs and getting people who have a disability or a special need into meaningful employment instead of simply proceeding with the Steps to Work scheme based on the Work Programme in England. Copying what has been done in other areas has failed abysmally and simply got people menial jobs carrying out menial roles. There is no chance of career progression and little sense of accomplishment in such roles. Many are employed for only 16 hours per week and are completely underemployed. We should look at something a lot more sustainable. There should be a community employment-led scheme for people who have special needs. They would be doing something that makes them feel good about themselves and carrying out roles that are much needed in many communities to drive up community development. That would be much more sustainable and a far better approach than some of the alternatives currently on offer.

I take the opportunity to ask the Minister to provide clarity on what programmes are available. There is a wide range. As we have heard in previous debates, there is little understanding among members of the Committee for Employment and Learning of

what exactly is on offer, so how someone looking for an opportunity is supposed to figure it out, I do not know. It is my view that the programmes are too complicated and there are far too many of them. It is far too hard for people to get on to the right programme, so I ask the Minister to provide clarity when responding to the debate.

Mr Douglas: I support the motion and pay tribute to my colleagues Lord Morrow and Peter Weir for bringing this important issue before the House.

Two weeks ago tomorrow, the Minister made a statement on economic inactivity, in which he said:

"there are many people with work-limiting conditions who, with the right support, may be able to participate. The results have suggested that interventions should focus on those individuals".

That day, the Minister was asked what he intended to do to change the current situation of young people with special needs leaving education at 19-plus and how he would ensure that they are valued, as indeed they are. He replied that such persons are "very much valued" and agreed:

"they have the potential to make a contribution to the world of work and that it is important that we provide them with support".

He said that his Department would have to pick up on that as part of this strategy and recognised it as an issue that must be addressed. I welcome that response and thank the Minister for it.

The figures on the employment and unemployment of these young people should alarm us. Unfortunately, as my colleague said, as a society, we have failed in our duty to provide enough employment for people with a disability. We have not done and are not doing enough to provide them with opportunities, training and employment. The current situation has further compounded these problems, and serious action must be taken. Think of the growing levels of unemployment among young people: how much more difficult is it for a young person with a special needs education to access a training opportunity or, more importantly, a job?

I acknowledge that the Minister and his Department have taken action to attempt to

redress that unfair imbalance, but a major issue is how the schemes are promoted and advertised by the Department. That must be looked into, and I ask the Minister to do that. For example, many young people suffering from a disability need information on how they can access services and help from us in the Assembly. Unfortunately, my research shows that it is not always readily available. When young people with disabilities leave education, clear guidance and advice must be available to help them choose whether to continue with education or to move into employment. I ask the Minister to look at that issue and to change it.

2.15 pm

Like a number of my colleagues, I pay tribute to the excellent work of the community and voluntary sector, which provides excellent services, often on a shoestring budget. Helping Hands, the autism support group, brought hundreds of people to Stormont recently for a day out.

Members said that young people with learning disabilities have difficulty getting into training and employment. That is a big fear for those families, and I support any initiative that supports young people aged 19-plus.

Like my colleague Chris Lyttle, I will highlight the Orchardville Society in east Belfast. That organisation is a model of excellence. It highlights clear examples of best practice and sets a high benchmark that we should follow. It provides people with a disability with an excellent support network, employment opportunities and the ability to build on skills and to obtain qualifications. It also gives them a sense of independence, which is key.

I will also mention the NOW project, which had a cook-off in the Assembly in 2011. Young people with special educational needs got together and provided top-class food, and I think that some of us here would certainly agree with that. They did an excellent job. The support that they get from the Department and from the private sector is very encouraging, so that is another model that we should look at.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the chance to speak on the topic, and I commend the Members who tabled the motion.

Although I am not a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I have dealt with the issue frequently through the education portfolio and recognise some of the difficulties that

parents and those with severe learning difficulties face. I have also raised the matter in the Education Committee on two occasions after especially good presentations from post-19 young people from Hill Croft School.

I have always believed that, regardless of their individual circumstances, every child should have an education that meets the full range of needs. That must be balanced with an appreciation that formal education, in the classic sense of a classroom and teacher, will eventually come to an end, as it does for everyone. For many, the end of school comes abruptly. In its review of transition, NICCY highlighted persistent failures and called for the need to improve transition planning urgently.

The current structures cannot be considered anywhere near sufficient or fair, despite much good work by various Departments. I understand that, for many young people with a condition such as autism, routine is paramount. The current situation of being an integral part of the school community one day and suddenly finding that your formal education has finished the next is unacceptable. Making the transition from post-primary education is difficult enough for most young people, never mind those who have moderate or severe learning difficulties. It is absolutely essential that we have sufficient opportunities for further and higher education provision for people with severe learning difficulties. I support the motion's call for increased numbers of support staff to make that a reality.

It would be remiss of me not to mention, as others have, Parkanaur residential vocational training college. It runs courses in business administration, catering, upholstery and horticulture. DEL funds 10 places annually. Are 10 places enough? Although it is to be welcomed, perhaps the Minister can update the House on the possibility of extending the funding for this worthwhile project.

My party also supports the continued expansion post-19 of the key treatments of behavioural therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy and sensory therapy. That proves the importance of the Department of Health in the debate. As we have heard from many, a cross-departmental approach is fundamental. The Department for Employment and Learning has an occupational psychology service, among other initiatives, and those should be built on and developed. To that end, I would like to hear what engagement there has been between the Health Minister and the Employment and Learning Minister, how it is taking place and

what they are putting in place to provide best services for those with learning difficulties.

Also relevant to today's debate — something that I have had concerns about in the past — is the provision of suitable respite for 19-year-olds. It is deeply regrettable that, when young people with a life-limiting condition leave school, they can sometimes effectively become confined to the house. Unfortunately, the provision of day centres is disparate across Northern Ireland, so I urge the trusts to identify and address any specific areas lacking in provision. That needs to be done now. We should also look at analysing the pressures that that puts on families and what needs to be done to remove those pressures.

It is also worth remembering that a period of respite is beneficial to more than just the young person in receipt of it. Families and carers welcome the opportunity for a short break in which their attention can be given to other things, safe in the knowledge that their loved one is being well looked after. I know from talking to many parents of children with severe disabilities that they value the respite that a school day provides. When young people reach the age at which they are coming to the end of their education, that often entails significant changes at home.

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

Mr Kinahan: To echo Pat Ramsey's passionate speech, I say that there is a need to look after those children so that the parents know what will happen to them when they are long gone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, so there is insufficient time for the Minister to respond to the debate between now and then. The debate will resume after the ministerial statement on local government reform. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 2.22 pm and resumed at 2.30 pm.

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Magdalene Laundries

1. **Ms McCorley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what actions they are considering in regard to those who were in the Magdalene laundries. (AQO 3819/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer the question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We are mindful of the pain suffered by many individuals who were resident in the Magdalene laundry-type institutions here. We sympathise greatly with the plight of all who have experienced abuse. Anyone with any information on any abuse of any kind should report it to the PSNI and to social services for investigation. Anyone who was resident here in the Magdalene laundries or similar institutions as a child between 1922 and 1995 can go forward to the inquiry into historical institutional abuse to relate their experiences. They will be able to talk in private about their experiences to two members of the inquiry's acknowledgement forum. Contact details for the inquiry are available on its website.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. As we all know, some abuse victims were moved between the Twenty-six Counties and the Six Counties. In light of that, has consideration been given to how we can assist the children from the Bethany homes who were separated from their families and moved to the Six Counties?

Mr Bell: In respect of what we are looking at within Northern Ireland, we are aware of and we are deeply upset by the great pain that was suffered by those who resided in Bethany House, the Westbank home and similar institutions in the Republic of Ireland. In the past, the movement of children between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland was neither regulated nor recorded. Consequently, identifying children from Northern Ireland who had any linkage to

institutions that are located in the Republic of Ireland would be very difficult. As those institutions are not within the jurisdiction of the Northern Ireland Assembly, allegations against them cannot be investigated here. Any such investigation would be a matter for the Irish Government. Where there are allegations of abuse within our jurisdiction, as I said, we encourage their being brought at once to the attention of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. We will engage further with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, as appropriate, on the issue of the institutions that are within their jurisdiction.

Ms Brown: I thank the junior Minister for his answers so far. Will the junior Minister outline how many people have come forward to the inquiry to date?

Mr Bell: The inquiry and investigation are independent of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However, I know that the work has been continuing, and many people have already been to see the acknowledgement forum and have had the opportunity to tell their experiences. In addition, I understand that 240 people have come forward to the inquiry with complaints, and they are being addressed and looked at to identify locations and systematic or systemic similarities.

Mr McDevitt: I note and welcome the Minister's statement that young women under the age of 18 who were in Magdalene homes will fall under the terms of the inquiry that is under way. However, can the Minister give the House an assurance that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will take steps urgently to scope out the extent to which the needs of women over the age of 18 may need to be addressed because they spent time in Magdalene institutions in this jurisdiction? Will he remain open-minded about the potential need for a future inquiry into their circumstances?

Mr Bell: As I said, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have agreed to ask an official in the Department to look at the issue and to present them with options. I understand that, as you pointed out in your question, many of those who were in the institutions are going to be covered by the current inquiry as they were minors at that time. We are conscious that there is a group, as you mentioned, that may not or will not be covered. That is why we have asked the official to take an initial look into the issue and to bring forward advice and options. We will be open-minded until we receive that report.

Mr Kinahan: Can the Minister outline the support that has been given to the victims of abuse who fall outside the remit of the recently established historical abuse inquiry? What effort is being made to offer them an inquiry?

Mr Bell: First of all, we need to be clear that anyone who has suffered any form of abuse the nature of which is a criminal act is entitled to an investigation by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and social services. Not only is that the legal position; it is the position that we encourage everyone to adopt. For those who are not included in the current process, the first point of contact is normally through a general practitioner or social services. A range of counselling organisations across Northern Ireland provide services to people who have been the victim of sexual and other forms of abuse. I encourage anybody who has suffered abuse at any time in their life to report that abuse, not only for themselves but so that there is an investigation of the alleged perpetrator in order to ensure that there is no recidivism, particularly where there was abuse of children.

Community Relations

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their Department's spend on community relations projects over the last five years. (AQO 3820/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Over the past five years, OFMDFM has allocated over £44 million to fund community relations work. That represents an increase of over 20% since 2008-09 and a much more significant increase from pre-devolution provision. The funding is complementary to the significant funds also being supplied under Peace III and other funds, such as the International Fund for Ireland. Over the past two decades, nearly £3 billion has been spent on good relations work through government and international funds. That funding has supported thousands of projects and helps to fund hundreds of workers to engage in building better community relations and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The significant level of funding reflects our continued commitment to work towards our vision of a shared and united community.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the First Minister for his answer. Can he outline any next steps in the development of a community relations strategy?

Mr P Robinson: A significant amount of work was done by the all-party group until, of course, some of its participants decided to leave. The remaining members completed a report that has been passed to us. It left three outstanding areas of activity that needed to be resolved. They involved flags, parades and the past. On the other issues, there was a high level of consensus among political parties. Sometimes, I get bemused when I listen to and read some of the reports on the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy. You would think that we were operating without a strategy at present. Of course, we still operate under the shared future strategy. However, now that officials have seen the high level of agreed and united approach to a range of issues, our present funding and other efforts are based not only on the shared future strategy, which, in my view, needs to be replaced urgently, but on the more updated views of political parties in Northern Ireland. I hope that we will be able to reach agreement on those outstanding issues so that the report can be published. Indeed, I think that it is fairly well known that I would be happy to publish it in its present form. Clearly, it will be published when the outstanding issues have been agreed, to whatever level of agreement is possible.

Mr Lyttle: Is the First Minister willing to clarify what exactly is causing the delay in publishing the report, given his desire to see it published?

Mr P Robinson: Of course, the Member is one of those who went AWOL during the discussions. When the hard work was being done to reach consensus on these matters, the so-called consensus party took stage left. I personally want to see the report published, but other political parties take the view that we should await the resolution of outstanding issues. It is only the resolution of those three areas that requires to be completed before the report can be published.

Mr Hamilton: If the First Minister were to listen to some commentators and, indeed, some in the House, he might believe two things: first, that there is no work going on on good relations in Northern Ireland and, secondly, that, if we only had a new strategy, all of Northern Ireland's ills would somehow be solved overnight. Will the First Minister outline for the House what impact the absence of a new strategy is having on good relations in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is right. I think that too much importance is perhaps attached to the agreement of a strategy. We want to

have that and will continue to work on the existing strategy, but that has not stopped us spending £3 billion of public funds to assist the work of good relations in Northern Ireland, nor does it stop the hundreds of people up and down the country who work day and daily to improve community relations in Northern Ireland. It will also not stop the deputy First Minister and me leapfrogging the difficulties that we are having with the CSI strategy to come forward with continued action plans. That is really what is important, rather than the strategy: points for action that can be taken to improve good relations.

Economy: Corporation Tax and Financial Assistance

3. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on any discussions with the Prime Minister on corporation tax. (AQO 3821/11-15)

8. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions with the UK Government on an additional financial package to boost the economy. (AQO 3826/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to take questions 3 and 8 together.

We met the Prime Minister, David Cameron, on 26 March to discuss the devolution of corporation tax powers to the Executive. The Prime Minister indicated that no decision would be made until autumn 2014. You will already be aware of our considerable disappointment that a decision on the devolution of the powers has now been deferred. We briefed the Executive on our discussions at their meeting on 28 March, and our disappointment was reiterated and shared by every member of the Executive. This was not unexpected, but it is regrettable and will delay our efforts to rebalance the local economy.

Our meeting with the Prime Minister was adjourned so that consideration could be given to an economic package for Northern Ireland. The aim of the package is to assist our economy by encouraging private sector growth. We are presently working with the United Kingdom Government on the details of that economic package, which will use the economic levers open to the Northern Ireland Executive and the UK Government respectively. We hope to be able to resume our meeting with the Prime Minister and agree a formal package in the coming weeks.

Mr Easton: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Will he explain why the meeting with the Prime Minister was adjourned in light of the fact that the Secretary of State put forward a set of recommendations and indicated that a decision on corporation tax was due by autumn 2014?

Mr P Robinson: The Secretary of State went on radio and announced a number of the issues that we were discussing in relation to the economic package. The deputy First Minister and I also have views on what should be in that economic package, so we want to have an ongoing discussion with them to try to improve the overall package. It comes very much by way of the kind of city deals that were completed between cities in GB and the United Kingdom Government. Clearly, if that were to occur in Northern Ireland, it would be on a much larger scale.

As for the announcement that they would take a decision by autumn 2014, we want to be absolutely clear that not only will that decision be taken but it will be capable of being implemented and legislated for before the end of that parliamentary term. Further work was being done on that.

2.45 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the First Minister for his answer. As he said, the Secretary of State has been heard on radio on several occasions talking about elements of the financial package, including enterprise zones. Does the First Minister have a view on whether a zonal or sectoral approach would be best suited to providing a plan B for rebalancing the economy?

Mr P Robinson: As far as plan B is concerned, we are operating on plan A. We are looking for plan A+ so that we can attach corporation tax-setting powers to it. When we talk about the lack of enterprise zones, I am never quite clear whether people believe that the whole of Northern Ireland should be an enterprise zone. I am up for that kind of proposition. I become concerned when people are looking for enterprise zones in Northern Ireland because, in my experience, they displace business from one area to another and often provide for unfair competition between businesses.

However, as an Executive, we are taking forward a number of proposals that were announced in our Programme for Government. At the same time, we have other proposals that can be taken forward only by Her Majesty's

Government, and we will encourage them to take some of those on board. I hope that we will reach agreement with the Government on the overall package around the end of April or the beginning of May.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I agree that the message from the British Government is that the only way to get corporation tax powers is by going for independence, and that applies to Scotland as much as it does to here. Does the First Minister really believe that the British Government intend to transfer corporation tax after the Scottish referendum?

Mr P Robinson: I fear that if the Government are not prepared to give the levers of setting corporation tax to Northern Ireland when they have explicitly and publicly indicated that there is a special case, they give a message to the people of Scotland that the only way to have greater fiscal autonomy is by way of separation. As a unionist, I think that that is a wrong message for the Government to give.

As to the second part of the Member's question about whether I believe that they will do it, all I can say is that if they do what they said they would do during the election, they will do it. If they do what they have indicated they believe is right, they will do it. If they do what they tell us they would like to do, except for some difficulty within the coalition and with the Treasury, they will do it.

I believe that there is a justifiable, moral, economic and political case to be made for tax-setting powers to be devolved to Northern Ireland. I believe that we have a special case and that they should take that decision straight away; they do not need to concern themselves about the issues with Scotland. If, however, they are leaving it until autumn 2014, I want to be sure that, if a positive decision is taken, it is capable of being implemented during this parliamentary term. If not, I rather suspect that it will not be implemented at all.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the First Minister for his answers so far. There is huge disappointment over the intransigence on the devolution of corporation tax. The First Minister mentioned that there are some ideas on a package. Does that package amount to a plan B? Will he share some of the ideas that might provide a stimulus to our local economy?

Mr P Robinson: We do not know what the final economic package will look like. As I looked over some of the issues that were being

proposed, I thought that some of them must have been put forward with a slightly tongue-in-cheek attitude. Some of the issues relating to Europe were matters that the deputy First Minister and I went to Europe to fight for. When we were there, our standing in Europe was probably slightly better than the Prime Minister's because of certain remarks he had made. Some of them were not new proposals; some were already being processed.

As far as a plan B is concerned, the Executive, perhaps more than any other part of the United Kingdom, have been capable of bringing forward proposals to stimulate our economy as far as it can be in our present circumstances. That is evidenced by the fact that we have been able to get more jobs into Northern Ireland than ever before and that we are doing better at that than anywhere else.

The key fault lines in the Northern Ireland economy are down to the size of the private sector vis-à-vis the public sector and our ability to achieve export-led growth. Those are the key factors. Having corporation tax-setting powers would be a step change. You can do whatever you like around the periphery, but it would be a very slow, long process because, traditionally, Northern Ireland has always been slower than any other part of the United Kingdom to come out of a recession or economic downturn of one form or another. It will be a very slow pace of improvement for Northern Ireland if we are to rely on whatever the Member describes as plan B. The only way for us to significantly change direction —

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

Mr P Robinson: — is to have corporation tax-setting powers. We have seen evidence of how the Irish Republic is capable of turning round the downturn in its economy. It has been doing so by bringing in, because of the low level of corporation tax in the South, very significant jobs.

Economic Growth

4. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures are being taken across the Executive to drive forward economic growth. (AQO 3822/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: The Executive have taken the important step of making the economy a top priority in their Programme for Government. We are committed to growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future. We want to achieve long-term economic growth by

improving competitiveness and building a larger and more export-driven private sector. To do that, we must rebuild the labour market and rebalance the economy to improve the wealth and living standards of everyone.

Our Programme for Government sets out the main actions: we are committed to increasing the number of jobs; increasing the value of exports; supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); increasing research and development; providing rate relief; eliminating air passenger duty (APD) on direct long-haul flights; investing in social enterprise growth; supporting creative industries; regenerating former military sites; supporting business; improving skills; attracting tourism; increasing the uptake of science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) subjects; and implementing a strategy to address economic inactivity.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for his response. Further to that, will he outline the economic impact that the development at the Maze and Balmoral Park will have for Northern Ireland, particularly the location of that site and the potential for the construction industry?

Mr P Robinson: You press a button when you raise the issue of the Maze because I have heard such a lot of claptrap over the past week on the subject. I have heard people who recommended and approved the location of the Maze for a peace and conflict resolution centre saying that it is the wrong place to have it, yet the Ulster Unionist Party proposed it. I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you will not allow me to go down that road any further.

Suffice it to say that there is a series of elements to what will go on site at the Maze. There is the peace and conflict resolution centre, and I hope that its construction will start soon. Work is going forward with the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society, which has a fantastic and imaginative proposal for the future. There is a massive amount of work to be done in the economic development of the site. I think that the Maze board is looking to get a development partner for that.

At the end of all that, we will have probably one of the largest and most important construction sites in the whole of the British Isles. We hope to have not only construction jobs but about 5,000 people employed on that site. It is a massive regeneration opportunity. As one of those who have had the opportunity to speak to people who want to develop on that site, I can tell you that there is massive global interest in its potential. Its location is such that it is a prime and attractive site. I believe that it can

provide jobs and economic growth for our region as a whole.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his response, and I very much welcome his outlining the range of measures that the Executive have adopted across the board. Although the First Minister has referred to some of this previously, does he agree that, if we have the necessary tools, fiscal and otherwise, we could be so much more successful?

Mr P Robinson: I think that the one thing that Northern Ireland has consistently shown throughout the years is that there is a high level of ingenuity in the Province. That is why so many companies come here for research and development.

This is an attractive place to come to. We have a population that is much younger than you will find almost anywhere else in Europe. In cost terms, we are very competitive, but I would not use the word "cheap". We also have a first-class telecommunications link with the rest of the world, particularly to the United States and Europe, which makes us very popular as a base for IT companies. We have a high level of education, with a GCSE-level pass rate that is some 10% higher than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. We also have two very good universities, with the Ulster University winning awards across the world, and Queen's University being a part of the Russell Group, which is the Ivy League of universities. So, we have all the ingredients that make this an attractive place to come to.

As I indicated in an answer to an earlier question, we have been successful in bringing more jobs here than at any time in our history, and, outside of London, we are the most popular area in the United Kingdom for each person in the population and for the size of location. That gives us a good start. If we add to that the potential to set our own level of corporation tax, I believe that we would be unbeatable.

Mr Byrne: I thank the First Minister for his answers so far and for his reference to the construction industry. Will he reaffirm the Executive's commitment to the A5 road project, given the importance that that project would have to north-west development and to the construction industry? Does the First Minister agree that the uncertainty is causing deep concern to many people who are involved, including those in the farming community and

the construction industry and to others who are associated with the project?

Mr P Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, I can see that you are allowing the question to be stretched a little. In their entirety, the Executive were disappointed at the court's decision. I do not blame the courts, as they will act according to the law as it stands, but, as an aside, let me say that we need to look at ways of reducing the courts' interference in what are political decisions.

There is a commitment on the part of the Executive to the A5 project. However, it is very clear that no matter what route we might take — that is not intended to be a pun — it will take a year to 18 months before work can really start on that site. If that is the case, the funds that were allocated to the project for its existing time frame would have to be reallocated. However, there is a commitment on the part of the Executive to proceed with the A5 project as soon as those issues are cleared and out of the way.

Gordon Gallagher

5. **Mr Allister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their Department has given all possible help to the Gallagher family from Londonderry in their humanitarian quest to identify the murderer of their nine-year-old son, Gordon. (AQO 3823/11-15)

Mr Allister: I trust that the supplementary question has not been talked out.

Mr P Robinson: Mr Deputy Speaker, you and I have no control over how long people take to ask and answer questions; that depends on the complexity of the questions that are asked.

The Gallagher family has not sought help from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. However, I assure the Member that I am willing to provide the family with all available help and assistance. I sympathise fully with the Gallagher family and can only imagine the tremendous suffering and pain that they have endured. I call on anyone with any information regarding the murder of their son to come forward and give it to the PSNI.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no time for a supplementary question. *[Interruption.]* Time is up, and we must move on.

3.00 pm

Environment

Councils: Capacity Building and Training

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the plans to develop future capacity building and training for new councillors and council officers. (AQO 3834/11-15)

6. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of the Environment what resources and training provision he is putting in place for the handover of planning powers to councils. (AQO 3839/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for his question. It is particularly important because, although there have been many examples of councils merging in other jurisdictions, there are not so many examples where, at the time of merger, additional powers have been transferred.

The multiple challenges of the review of public administration (RPA) are quite evident, and we must build councillor and management capacity to deal with that level of change. That is why I am glad that, a couple of months ago, the Executive allocated £3 million of their £48 million RPA budget allocation to capacity-building and training. That is why the Department, working with Community Places and the chief executive of Ballymena Borough Council, is scoping out what needs to be done to develop councillor and management capacity and training in the run-up to RPA to ensure that, when it happens, it is done right and ratepayers are not disappointed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I understood that you were to group questions 1 and 6 for answer. Is that your intention?

Mr Attwood: It is, yes. I am sorry.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. He touched on some of the issues. Obviously, we are dealing in the most part with bigger councils and a bigger burden of work on councillors, especially, as he pointed out, with issues such as responsibility for planning being moved to councils. Will the local councils themselves be involved in the design of capacity-building?

Mr Attwood: Very much so. As I said in my initial answer, the chief executive of one of our councils is leading the group that is scoping out what level of councillor and management training will be required, bedding the project very much into the life of councils, and also into the life of communities. That is why my officials will be working with Community Places, the community-based planning organisation, to ensure that citizens, communities, councillors and management are fully aware of the scale of the new responsibilities, not least when it comes to planning decisions, community planning and development plans.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for the information that he has provided. Particularly as there will be newly elected members on the new councils, will part of the training cover clear responsibilities around planning issues? Until this point, councillors have really been lobbyists on planning issues. In future, Minister, you are making them decision-makers. There is a clear conflict of interest between the two responsibilities.

Mr Attwood: I may be making them decision-makers, but the entire Executive are making them take on that responsibility. However, the point is a good one. As I have said many times in the Chamber and elsewhere, if you speak to the Scottish planning Minister, John Swinney, he will tell you that, in Scotland, there are councils with planning functions that understand what it is to be a planning authority, and there are other councils that continue to play a lobbying role. That is an important role — I do not diminish it — but there is a material difference between being a lobbyist and a decision-maker.

When it comes to making decisions, let councils understand that, although we will give them power and build their capacity, they will have to conduct themselves entirely properly. That is why the draft local government reorganisation Bill, which is circulating among Executive colleagues, provides for a regime of ethical standards and appeals from citizens against what a council might do. That is to ensure, whether in planning or any other transferred function, councillors conduct themselves ethically and properly.

Ms Lo: The Environment Committee has recently been looking at the training budget for local councils. It appears that most of the money is for council staff, probably quite rightly and for valid reasons. Is a proportion of the £3 million that has been put aside for capacity-building earmarked for councillor training?

Mr Attwood: I await the advice of the group chaired by the chief executive of Ballymena. The members of that group are the people who are scoping out the issue; but you can rest assured that I anticipate that that budget will be allocated for dedicated councillor, dedicated management and dedicated joint councillor and management training. I think it will cover all bases. If it does not, then, on the far side of 2015, the quality and service of what councillors and managers deliver to local citizens will not be what they hope for.

Mrs D Kelly: Given the importance of audit in ensuring that there is fairness throughout all local government decision-making and the perception of fairness, will the Minister strengthen the powers of the local government auditor and ensure that the role and function of local councillors as scrutineers is strengthened in the capacity-building training?

Mr Attwood: I think there are many ways to skin that particular cat. That is why in the local government Bill there is going to be a number of checks, balances and requirements placed on councillors and councils in order to live up to best practice and proper standards, be it the ethical standards that fall to councillors, the requirements of proportionality when it comes to the appointment of people to various posts within and outside councils or when it comes to performance standards within the conduct of councils themselves. There will be multiple models, allied with the existing powers of the local government auditor, so that, by law and practice, councils will be measured and judged, and will judge themselves, against the best standards.

Planning Policy Statement 21: Newbuilds

2. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to relax the requirement to group newbuilds within a cluster of existing farm buildings under PPS 21. (AQO 3835/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question and record that he has raised this particular matter on a number of occasions. As the Member knows, an operational review has been ongoing in respect of PPS 21. That review was deliberately in real time and real life in order to ensure that PPS 21 was being rolled out properly. The consequence of that is that although public representatives will make many points to Ministers, the operation of PPS 21 over recent months has not been the subject of great correspondence. Given the training that

was rolled out in respect of PPS 21 and the peer review that is ongoing in respect of hard cases, whereby senior management review decisions are taken by local planning authorities, and so on and so forth, I think that PPS 21 is in a better place this year compared to two years ago.

However, when I come to the Chamber before recess in respect of the operation of PPS 21, I will outline where proper interpretation and flexibility of PPS 21 will be applied in respect of new dwellings in existing clusters, replacement dwellings, conversion and reuse of existing buildings, ribbon development and the point touched on by the Member in his question.

Mr Clarke: I think I thank the Minister for his response. I am somewhat unsure about what he just said. I welcome his foresight in looking at the issue, but, although it has no direct response to the problems as such, most people working within the parameters of the policy see the problem as being in the clause itself, whereby people are being forced to cluster. It is for that reason that I am asking the Minister whether he has any intention of relaxing that to make it more appropriate for someone to build a house, and not necessarily forcing them beside existing buildings.

Mr Attwood: As I indicated, there has not been a litany of correspondence or representations from MLAs or other local representatives in recent times that the policy is doing violence to what people would like to see as the outcome of PPS 21 and CTY in particular. That is why, in my view, the Planning Service, when it comes to the application of CTY10, and, in particular, where there may be exceptional circumstances for alternative sites, has been demonstrating some level of greater flexibility.

If the Member or Members have further examples that indicate that that is not the case, I will look at them, as the Member knows I have done previously with cases that he has referred to me.

When I come back to the Chamber, as I indicated, I will comment on new dwellings, replacement dwellings, conversion and re-use of buildings, ribbon developments and the matter that was touched on by the Member, which will, I think, give some further reassurance if that is required.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer.

I want to bring the Minister on to the issue of non-farm rural dwellers. I know that he said that he has not received correspondence, but we are putting it on the table now. I welcome the question being asked today, because we need to come back to it. I welcome the mention of ribbon developments. However, it is about time that we introduced —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member get to the question, please.

Mr Boylan: The question is coming, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister introduce criteria that will address the needs of non-farming rural dwellers who are not getting opportunities to make an application in the countryside? That is something that has not been brought forward in PPS 21.

Mr Attwood: At one level, I have to warn myself and caution the House. Members know the history of PPS 21; they know about the toing and froing around it and how it was eventually brought forward by the planning Minister but was subject to consideration by an Executive subcommittee.

I am expressing caution because if I moved beyond what is in PPS 21 — if anyone might suggest that — and its proper interpretation, given the controversial history of this particular planning policy statement, sooner or later, somewhere or other, I would be in court on the wrong side of a court judgement. So, let us have a little caution, given the history of all this.

When I come back to the House in respect of the operational review, and when we outline how the training was rolled out and how it was very rigorous in its interpretation of PPS 21, including for non-farm rural dwellers, whilst there will be hard cases and there will be times and places when you cannot tell people what they want to hear because it would be beyond the competence of the policy, I think that people will conclude that the policy, subject to those further flexibilities, will be fit for purpose.

Mr Gardiner: Has the Minister issued any guidance to planning officers on allowing flexibility on this issue of policy, and will any such guidance be shared with the House?

Mr Attwood: Yes, policy guidance has been issued. I will give the Member one example for the purposes of this Question Time. Guidance was issued in respect of what constitutes an active farm and on how to interpret clustering, especially in the context of health and safety issues. In that way, in my view, that is why we

do not have a narrative of many people raising many cases about the interpretation of PPS 21 today, compared with previous days.

Councils: Senior Officers

3. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline how senior officers will be appointed to the 11 new councils. (AQO 3836/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. I am awaiting some legal advice on the matter that is touched on in the question. The reason is because it is my view that, in going forward, when it comes to the appointment of senior officers in the 11 new councils, there should, as fully as is possible, be open competition. That is the standard against which I think the reform programme should be judged.

That being my ambition, I hope that the legal advice will confirm that that is a legally proper and justified approach. In my view, it would be healthy that, as we go through this reform programme, given the number of councils that we are now going to have and the scale of the new responsibilities, there should be greater opportunity for senior posts to be appointed by way of open competition.

3.15 pm

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. By way of clarification, is there any timescale in mind? When does he envisage any of the appointments taking place?

Mr Attwood: When the voluntary transition committees become statutory — the regulations in that regard will be tabled in the Chamber shortly — one of their powers will be the power of appointment of senior officers. Once the voluntary becomes statutory, they will have the legal authority to proceed, if they are so minded — I will certainly encourage them so to do — to create certainty about the council leadership and the management side. Therefore, I would like appointments processes to be rolled out in this financial year. If I am right that the law allows open competition for those posts, I hope that open competition arises in the course of the next year.

Mr Spratt: I welcome the Minister's comments on this subject so far. Certain chief executives are already making threats that, if chief executives are not put into post in the 11 councils, they will take legal action. It seems to

me that it should be open to competition. I think that the Minister has confirmed that that will be the case. Given that there will be some very good candidates who run major organisations outside local government, it should be open to those outside local government to apply for these major posts.

Mr Attwood: There will also be very good candidates in local councils who could run local government organisations. This is not an approach that aims to exclude people. It is an approach that aims to include all those in councils and others outside who may have the skills and ambition to lead the new councils at chief executive and senior officer level. There may be different views on the law on this. There may have been a view historically about what is or is not permitted. The policy position, which I trust will also be the legal position, is to have open competition as fully as possible.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí. Does the Minister agree that it is extremely important that we get the best possible candidates so that the new councils operate effectively and efficiently and that, by and large, open competition is the best way to achieve that?

Mr Attwood: I welcome the fact that all those who have contributed on this question seem to be on the same page; namely, that there should be open competition. I hope that that is heard far and wide.

Planning: Waste Disposal Plant, Mallusk

4. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of the Environment whether a planning application has been submitted for a waste disposal plant at Mallusk. (AQO 3837/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I can confirm that no planning application has been lodged with the planning department in respect of any waste disposal plant at Mallusk. I can also confirm that pre-application discussions on that matter are ongoing between the Department and the developer. Although it is outwith the pre-application discussion process that the Department is involved in, I understand that the applicant is conducting their own pre-application discussion with the local community.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for clarifying that. Are there any other pre-application

discussions going on for similar proposals? If so, when will we be made aware of those?

Mr Attwood: In respect of the waste procurement strategy, as Members know, the Southern Waste Management Partnership (SWaMP) proposal is no longer to be taken forward. As Members know, the north-west proposal is being taken forward with some financial cover from the Executive. Nearly all the member councils of the north-west proposal are in agreement with that proposal. There are no other pre-application discussions (PAD) ongoing in respect of a waste proposal. There is a planning application in the system that is separate from the waste procurement strategy. It has been advertised publicly. The application is on behalf of Bombardier in the harbour estate. It is, in terms of its commercial organisations and in a private way, making a proposal for energy from waste in respect of its requirements.

Mr Campbell: Has the Minister indicated to senior planning officials how comprehensive and detailed their discussions should be in pre-planning processes, particularly as regards in-depth discussions that need to take place?

Mr Attwood: I will give a very clear reassurance to the Member and the House. When I came into this job, I was anxious to ensure that, given our obligations under European directives and the desirability of moving towards an avoidance of landfill in respect of our waste, consistent with good practice and good law, the process around procurements was taken forward. Whether it was SWaMP, the North West Region Waste Management Group or Arc21, the standards were these: deliverability in respect of a site, which was touched upon by Mr Campbell; affordability in respect of the council's view; and legal and financial viability in terms of the backers of any scheme, given that there is a lot of money at stake.

In terms of deliverability, we will have been exhaustive in dealing with any possible planning application from Arc21, and we are being exhaustive with respect to the PAD. It is very important that, when it comes to road issues, the suitability of a site, the interests of the local community or any other valid planning considerations, this matter is got right. That has been made very clear to the promoters of the scheme.

Mr Byrne: Is the Department of the Environment strategy on waste management

being updated in line with the requirements in the EU landfill directive?

Mr Attwood: I confirm that that is the case. We will shortly go out to consultation in respect of what I call a "recast plus" waste management strategy. Among other things, in terms of our environmental ambitions, we need to grapple with and grasp whether we should have a ban on domestic waste going to landfill. Should we have a requirement on our local councils to provide suitable containers into which household food waste is deposited? Those are the sort of issues that we have to grapple with, including a forthcoming consultation, in the next number of days, on a statutory 60% recycling target in respect of domestic and municipal waste, which is beyond the 50% target that we are obliged, under European standards, to fulfil.

The introduction of the carrier bag levy last week demonstrated that there is an — excuse the word — appetite for citizens and communities to take forward opportunities to deal with waste on the one hand and tackle climate change in our own ways on the other. That is why a recast waste strategy with further examples of landfill diversion is the way we need to go.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr David McIlveen is not in his place to ask question 5. Question 6 was grouped with question 1.

Single-use Carrier Bag Levy

7. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of the Environment how he plans to use the revenue generated from the recently introduced single-use plastic bag levy. (AQO 3840/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I touched on that in my last answer. As I indicated when the levy on single-use plastic bags was introduced, save the administrative costs, which will be in and around £600,000 a year, with those jobs being located up in the city of Derry, the rest of the moneys will go to environmental causes. What will those causes be? My ambition is to have a river restoration fund, a sustainability and innovation fund and more money allocated to the Northern Ireland Environment Link community challenge fund and Rethink Waste. So, 80% of the money that comes in will go out through interventions to support the economy, especially at a community level.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister give assurances that all revenue-generating transactions will be open and transparent?

Mr Attwood: Yes. As with any other income or expenditure by government, requirements are laid down by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), the Audit Office and departmental standards on disclosure and accountability. Those will be no less with the income generated by the carrier bag levy.

Mr Elliott: Are there any proposed savings from the original suggested administration costs for the single-use bag levy?

Mr Attwood: There was a suggestion in the Department initially that the management of the single-use carrier bag levy should be administered by a third-party private organisation. I opposed that proposal because the costs would have been significantly more. It proves the point that many services are better delivered by public organisations rather than by private organisations, and people should not idly embrace a private model when there is a better public model, as there is with the carrier bag levy. The cost is £600,000 a year on a rolling basis. Given the environmental benefits of the proposal and the small income streams that will go back to the environmental organisations that I outlined in my original answer, I do not think that that is a highly significant amount of money for bringing about a highly significant change in environmental practice.

Mrs McKevitt: It is perhaps too early to ask whether there has been positive or negative feedback. However, has the Minister had any feedback at all from shop owners?

Mr Attwood: Yes, I have had feedback, and the retail industry increasingly recognises that this was the right time for the measure. My strong sense is that citizens and consumers were well ahead of some of the politics and the law, and people had been conditioned by the plastic bag levy in the Republic of Ireland to begin to adjust their behaviour. Consumers in the North have welcomed and embraced the levy enthusiastically. The business side raised some questions, but we were innovative in how we rolled it out and communicated with people, and we had the support of good business leaders. The National Federation of Retail Newsagents Northern Ireland said that the levy would reduce costs to local newsagents without any disproportionate increase in management and bureaucracy. Those wise words are almost verbatim. The retail industry has widely and increasingly recognised that.

Wind Farms: West Tyrone

8. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the scale and proliferation of wind farms in West Tyrone. (AQO 3841/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for the question, which touches on a point that is beginning to emerge more acutely in Derry and Tyrone in particular. To date, 48 planning applications have been submitted for wind farms in the Omagh and Strabane district council areas. That is 40% of all applications that have been submitted, of which 29 have been approved; 15 have been built; two are under construction; three are with the Planning Appeals Commission, and 14 are under consideration.

Issues are arising with potential new advice on noise and certainly on cumulative impact. I keep that under very close watch, given that more and more questions are being asked. That said, two conclusions also need to be borne in mind. First, as I keep saying, renewables are Ireland's biggest economic opportunity. We should be minded to embrace the opportunity for self-sufficiency in electricity.

Secondly, it seems to me that, more and more, community benefits need to be built in to the planning system to ensure that the benefits, whether from renewable applications or other significant applications, go to the community. So the DOE and Community Places are organising a community benefit summit for the first week in June to try to ensure that, while we deal with concerns about wind farms, more and more benefits go to local citizens and communities because of them.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Once again, we do not have time for a supplementary. That concludes Question Time.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am looking for clarity on the grouping of questions. The practice of grouping similar questions is a good one because it gives more people an opportunity. However, when a Minister asks the Chair to consider a grouping and other questions on the Order Paper could obviously be grouped, has the Chair any role in suggesting such a grouping?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am happy to clarify that: the Chair has no role. I was simply pointing out to the Minister that a grouping had been arranged by him, not the Chair.

Mr McCartney: I am not referring to your reminding the Minister of a particular grouping; I am talking generally. There are times when, quite rightly, a Minister asks for questions to be grouped, but there are other occasions when very similar questions are not grouped. I just wonder who has a role to play in that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am happy to clarify for the Member that it is entirely in the hands of the Minister.

Members will take their ease for a moment while we change the top Table.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

Ministerial Statement

Local Government Reform: Transfer of Functions to New Councils

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate you on taking up your new position in the Assembly.

On a more solemn note, I want to acknowledge that, unfortunately, the husband of Evelyne Robinson — she is one of the North's very best councillors and sits on Ballymoney Borough Council — who had been suffering ill health, died in the past number of days. Evelyne has been of enormous assistance to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and the Department in their work on local government reform, including the transfer of functions. I want to record the sympathy of the House for her and her family.

I turn now to the statement. The reform of local government is one of the fundamental building blocks of streamlining public administration, a process first started some years ago. It has already produced change in the administration of the health sector, and the education sector is also undergoing major change. I believe that Northern Ireland does reform well, even if too slowly and, in some places, with reluctance. Indeed, I believe that we need a new phase of deep reform to progress our politics and deepen our democracy. These initiatives, taken together, can benefit our society and citizens and are further steps towards a sustainable future. Bringing decision-making and responsibility for functions and related services closer to the communities and citizens affected by them is part of political independence and authority, and it is this that is central to the reform of local government.

The local government reform programme is, arguably, the most complex policy issue before the Assembly today. As I said at Question Time, although there have been many examples of the number of councils in a jurisdiction being reduced, it is not often the case that, at the same time as merging councils, you have the transfer of significant functions. Therefore, it is, in my view, very much the case that this is a complex policy issue, as I referred to.

The reform is huge in scale, has over 140 main work strands and involves multiple interfaces,

partners and stakeholders. The multiplicity necessary to process this work through the voluntary transition committees, the statutory transition committees, when they come into place, the regional transition committees and the multiple mechanisms under all that is testament to the scale of what is being undertaken. As I said, it needs to be remembered that, although other jurisdictions have merged councils, it is rare that councils merge and receive enhanced powers at the same time.

As Minister, I have continued to push hard for progress across the board, even with some misgivings in one or two places. RPA is on track to meet the commitment in the 2011-15 Programme for Government to have the 11 new councils in place by April 2015. There are now just 700 days to grasp an opportunity for change that last arose over 40 years ago. I urge all those who have influence to bear and all those involved to ensure that we maximise that opportunity. I have said before, in answer to a question from Mr Weir, that we have a once-in-a-political-lifetime opportunity to get this done, get it done right and get it done on time. After extended negotiation with ministerial colleagues, I can now report that, on 11 April, the Executive agreed a package of functions that will transfer new powers and responsibilities to the 11 new councils from 1 April 2015. That adds to the momentum that I have been steadily building and brings the further clarity needed to clear the way for the great deal of work still to be done. Greater clarity will also help to alleviate the anxiety among the many staff impacted by the changes and the uncertainty among elected members who face significant change.

The Executive decided what is to transfer on 1 April 2015. My Department will transfer local operational planning, which consists of local development plan functions and development control and enforcement. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) is transferring off-street parking, except park-and-ride. The Department for Social Development (DSD) is transferring the following areas of urban regeneration and community development: functions associated with physical development, such as environmental improvement schemes, and Members will note the statement that the Minister for Social Development issued today on Streets Ahead in Belfast; area-based regeneration, such as neighbourhood renewal; and some community development programmes for the voluntary and community sectors. DSD is also transferring the following housing functions: registration of houses in multiple occupation; and housing

unfitness responsibilities, including repair and demolition notices.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is transferring a number of local economic development activities from Invest NI, namely the Start a Business programme and enterprise shows; youth entrepreneurship, such as the Prince's Trust and Shell LiveWIRE; social entrepreneurship; Investing for Women; and neighbourhood renewal funding relating to enterprise initiatives. The following local tourism initiatives are also moving to councils: small-scale tourism accommodation development; providing business support, including business start-up advice along with training and delivery of customer care schemes; and providing advice to developers on tourism policies and related issues.

A number of other functions and assets are moving from DARD and DCAL. Those are the delivery of the EU rural development programme; authority to spot list to enable councils to add a building to the statutory list on a temporary basis, subject to ratification by the DOE; authority to draw up local lists of buildings that are of architectural or historic interest; Armagh County Museum; local water recreational facilities; greater involvement of local government in local sports decisions; and Donaghadee harbour.

As Members will be fully aware, it is also intended to introduce a statute-based system of council-led community planning. Community planning is a process whereby councils, statutory bodies and the community and voluntary sectors work together to develop and implement a shared vision for promoting the well-being of their area and to pave the way for the most efficient use of scarce resources.

Now that the package of functions is agreed, it is important that we move swiftly to confirm the number of staff transferring and the quantum of funding. In confirming these details, Ministers will have regard to the principle agreed by the previous Executive, which is not in dispute: functions that are to transfer from central to local government should be fit for purpose, sufficiently funded and cost-neutral to the ratepayer at the point of transfer. That point cannot be stressed enough. If, on the far side of the transfer of functions, they fail to live up to those requirements, to the disappointment of councillors, citizens and ratepayers, all this effort, which has taken a long time to evolve and mature, will create disappointment, if not worse, in our local council areas. All of that will require the transfer of resources from central to

local government when the functions transfer. There will also be a requirement for Departments to commit adequate resources in preparation for the functions to transfer.

Ministerial colleagues have agreed to provide me with information on staff transferring and the quantum of funding by 31 May 2013. I anticipate that there will be some conversations with Ministers on the detail of that over the next four or five weeks. All of that will enable Departments to provide certainty to their staff and to draw up firm transfer plans to ensure that all functions are fit for purpose and properly financed. It will also enable councils to begin to plan new organisational structures and arrangements.

The previous Executive agreed a vision for local government in March 2008. That vision is one of a strong, dynamic local government creating communities that are vibrant, healthy, prosperous, safe and sustainable and have the needs of all people at their core. Central to the vision is the provision of high-quality, efficient services that respond to the needs of people and continuously improve over time.

There was a clear view that, to deliver that vision, the functions to be transferred should be cohesive and that a critical mass or family of functions was needed. The functions that we will transfer in 2015 form the bedrock on which to build such critical mass. It is not the end in itself, because there may be some opportunities beyond 2015 to build on that critical mass in order to have proper functions more embedded in our local democracy.

Transferring planning and regeneration powers will allow locally elected leaders to begin to shape the places in which they live. Too often, we concentrate on the technical when it comes to RPA — the funding or the character of the new local government — but people should also remember and begin to embrace more and more the opportunities that RPA will create for local councils in working with local communities to shape their local areas and bring about local benefit, including local jobs. The other transferring functions, coupled with new community planning powers, will allow local councils, as I indicated, to become effective local champions, responding to the aspirations and concerns of their communities and guiding, in partnership with others, the future development of their area.

It is important that we recognise that the transfer of functions from central to local government should be a process rather than an event. There are potentially other functions that

would be better delivered at a local level. Therefore, the Executive Committee have also agreed that in April 2016, one year after the initial transfer, the transfer package should be reviewed with a view to augmenting it.

As to the wider local government reform programme, among the other major achievements to date I number the recent announcement on the provision of a funding package; the ongoing consultation on councillor severance; the imminent appointment of a councillor remuneration panel; the draft local government Bill now in circulation among Ministers; and the forthcoming regulations on statutory transition committees. Each by itself is a substantial piece of work, and together they begin to put in place the architecture and mechanisms to underpin and deliver the ambitious challenge before us now and ahead.

In managing the reform programme, I have taken pains to involve elected representatives, both local and regional. The regional transition committee and the regional transition operational board, which I put in place to provide robust oversight, direction and vigour, have continued to meet regularly. The more recently established political reference group held its inaugural meeting in December and will meet again this week. I have also visited all 11 voluntary transition committees at their cluster locations to see, at first hand, how they are approaching the considerable work that they need to undertake and to listen to their issues and concerns. As I indicated previously, we are well past the point of no return.

I also acknowledge the contribution of staff, both centrally and locally. As I have tried to indicate in this statement and elsewhere, the scale of what has been undertaken and potential ambition of what we can achieve means that we need to work through all the issues, technical and political. Given the scale of all of that, the work done by many officers on many councils — not all to the same scale, I have to say — and by many in central government needs to be acknowledged. We would not be here today had it not been for their care and attention, diligence and leadership in taking all this forward.

Elements of the reform programme are not as I recommended, but with time now racing on we must ensure that the 11 councils in 2015 live up to the expectations, hopes and needs of citizens, communities and business. We must deliver for them, and that, ultimately, is the test. We are all public servants, and we must demonstrate, in getting this done and done right, that public servants are delivering on

behalf of the local people we represent. The recent Executive funding decision means that councils, through low-interest loans, reserves and sharing and collaboration, can help to ensure that reform is fully funded without burden to the ratepayers. The transition committees — soon to be statutory — must ensure that their reform plan is comprehensive, deliverable, agreed and funded. The London Government must ensure that their work on boundaries is completed and legislated for this year. The DOE must build on its vast programme of work to date, keep its eye on the prize and keep driving reform forward.

3.45 pm

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I also offer my congratulations to you on taking up your new position.

I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the Executive's decision on the package of transferred functions. However, there is not really a lot of detail in this very important announcement. Will the Minister set out the next major steps, milestones and the timetable? Is he confident that the transfer of functions will be in place by April 2015?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for welcoming the statement. At the Executive meeting on 11 April that agreed these matters, I dealt directly with the issue of whether we would have merger and transfer at the same time, because there had been some chat that maybe they should be separated. I argued at the Executive that I believed that that was not the right thing to do. I believe that there are issues of political credibility if you go down that road, and I believe that there is sufficient time to get this done and done right. There are many examples of reform programmes in Northern Ireland, even recently, that demonstrate that, with dedication and application, you can get even more significant reform programmes than this over the line in even less time. I refer to the life of the first Policing Board — there are Members here who were on that board — which, in five years, saw the accomplishment, fully or substantially, of 85% of the 175 Patten recommendations. I am opposed to any suggestion of separating the timing of the transfer from the timing of the merger, and I believe that that is the way that we should go. There was no dispute, no difference and virtually no comment at the Executive meeting when I made the argument that that was the way we needed to go.

With regard to the next phase, I trust that, in the next three or four months, the Executive will agree the draft reorganisation Bill and it will come to the Chamber for First Reading and Second Reading in advance of the summer before going its own way back to you as Chair of the Environment Committee.

Secondly, the councillor severance arrangements will conclude. My ambition is that the councillor severance will go live in August, subject to agreement of the regulations. Similarly, regulations will be tabled shortly in the House in respect of making the voluntary committees statutory, so that they will be able to go statutory in June.

The members of the remuneration panel, which will take forward the independent review of what the pay and conditions for councillors should be post reform, have been identified. They will be formally appointed on 1 May, and they have been given six months to take forward that work. Those four examples — the Bill, the severance, the statutory transition committees and the appointment of the remuneration panel — demonstrate that, on the DOE side, the scale of work is accelerating. We need to see a parallel acceleration at local council level in the works that they are taking forward. DOE can try to get the multiple tasks over the line, but the clusters themselves have to get the multiple tasks over the line. I think that there has been a bit of a sea change in recent months in that regard, and I have seen fewer political issues and more operational issues coming into the conversation of the voluntary and regional transitional committees. However, they, like us, need to accelerate in order to ensure that Ms Lo's anxiety about getting this done and done right does not arise.

Mr Hamilton: I agree with the Minister's comments in his statement about the need for reform in Northern Ireland. He will know that it is my view that reform of local government presents a unique opportunity for people in local government to shape their areas in a way that those of us who used to be in local government could only dream of.

The Minister said that we had passed the point of no return. Hopefully, that means that some of the arguments about RPA are now dispensed with. Does he detect in his discussions with local government that there is now a willingness to embrace the fact that this is now an opportunity to shape the future of the new council areas in the way that he outlines and that many of the rest of us hope will happen?

Mr Attwood: I do not want to suggest that there is unanimity across the 26 councils or the 600-plus councillors or that everybody is on the same page in embracing the reform programme. That is not going to be the case, and I have no doubt that arguments will endure. However, if there is certainty in the law around the reorganisation Bill and the regulations around severance and statutory transition committees; if there is certainty in respect of central government's welcome contribution to the family and funds that will be required for RPA; if there is certainty on the transfer of functions and, I trust, by the end of May, certainty on what that looks like in terms of money and staff to be transferred by the Departments that are transferring, then all that has to send out the message to all councils, clusters and councillors that there is certainty from where I, government and the Assembly are standing.

They have to demonstrate an equal level of certainty. I will touch on one example, which is the issue of how councils will contribute to the funding of RPA. I recently escalated my conversations with councils in that regard. How have I done that? I have written to all the councils asking them, on the far side of their audited accounts, to come back to DOE and to me by the end of May with what they believe is the true figure of useable reserves as part of the funding of RPA.

There are a lot of reserves in councils. Some are required for good business reasons or for financial commitments that have been entered into and so on and so forth. On the far side of that, however, there is a sum of money around the councils that, in my view, could be part of the contribution to the funding of RPA to ensure that there is no burden on ratepayers. There is dispute about that, and it is not easy, because, even within clusters, there are clearly different levels of reserves. One council in a cluster may think, "That is our money, not your money, and you are not getting it". We have to break through all that and say that, where there are useable reserves in a council cluster, those need to go into the pot of money to assist with the funding of RPA, because we cannot have a situation where there is a burden on ratepayers. The council clusters have until the end of May to have that information back to me. They have an obligation to make a contribution through that and through escalating the sharing and collaboration of services in a way that sees a reduction of costs at local council level.

I am not taking this approach for stand-and-deliver reasons. I have said that, when it comes to, for example, the sale of surplus

assets, I do not have any ambition that local councils are going to find a pot of gold in the run-up to RPA in terms of the sale of surplus assets. The market is not that interested in the sale of any asset, never mind the surplus assets of local councils. So, in my view, there are some areas in which councils will not be able to do very much, if anything at all, to contribute to funding RPA. However, there are other areas where, in my view, the ratepayer will expect the council to find money, for example from reserves, to help fund RPA, and they should, because that is not council money but ratepayer money. Ratepayers have a right to see that money spent to ensure that RPA is not a burden on the rates.

Mr Boylan: Comhghairdeas, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I congratulate you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and welcome the Minister's statement.

Minister, in your statement, you mentioned "fit for purpose" and "sufficiently funded". Will you outline clearly that you recognise that the powers to be transferred must be strong enough to give decision-makers proper powers to deliver for communities? I am talking about, in general, the Planning Bill. Also, given that the planning function is fee-dependent, is there a default position in the event that councils run into difficulties with those fees? The function is supposed to be viable, and there is obvious concern in local authorities that they may not be able to deliver on that.

Mr Attwood: Thank you for the question. The Executive have decided to set three standards, so, this is not my whim or that of any other Minister. The three standards to be met for transfer of functions are that they are fit for purpose, they are sufficiently funded and there is no cost to the ratepayer. Nobody has ever disputed that those are the three standards.

As I indicated, with all due respect to the school of permanent secretaries in this place, there will be permanent secretaries who will want to keep a little money for a rainy day. Therefore, Ministers will have to make sure that those standards — fit for purpose, sufficient funding and no cost to the ratepayer — are realised at the point of transfer in 2015. Otherwise, we are selling councils short. There will be some issues around all of that — you just raised the point, Mr Boylan, and Mr Elliott has also made the point — in how we ensure that, although the function has been transferred, there is not, on the far side of years 1, 2 or 3, some clawback from central government when it comes to the funding regime. It must be ensured that it is

sufficiently and securely funded when transferred.

The variation in planning fees is the nature of the planning system. You will have periods when planning income surges and others, as we have seen over the past two or three years, when it declines year on year and month on month, which continues to be the case. That will have to be managed at local council level when the planning function is transferred. At the same time, we must ensure that, at the point of transfer, councils have certainty that there is nothing round some distant corner whereby there would be clawback to central government in a way that would prejudice the financial arrangements of a council. That will not be the case. Nonetheless, councils will, in the fullness of time, have to manage the new services and functions for which they will have responsibility, and they will have to make corporate and local plans on the basis of what is needed financially year on year and decade on decade to fulfil those functions. They do it in respect of all other local functions, and they will be able to do it when it comes to the new functions.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, and I congratulate you on your elevation to such high office.

The Minister was at pains to point out in his statement that the transfer of functions was moving ahead at full steam. Nonetheless, does he share my concerns, given the high cost entailed in the reform of public administration overall, that a number of Departments are refusing to transfer any functions? Will the Minister outline which Departments those are?

Is it not the case that some Departments, including the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), are rolling back on the transfer of functions that had been suggested in 2008-09? Has the Minister any concerns that, for their own party political purposes, some parties are trying to change the election date to prevent it from coinciding with the European election on 22 May of next year?

4.00 pm

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. I do not think that I used the term "full steam ahead"; I said that there was a point of no return and that the Department of the Environment (DOE) and other Departments were showing good authority. It is not the case that it is full steam ahead, because, as I indicated, not all council clusters are as advanced as others might be.

However, I can say that there is a lot more coal going into the engine, and that there is certainly a lot more steam and, hopefully, a lot more product as we speak.

It was my view that the transfer of functions needed certainty. In fact, I invoked the three-meeting rule at the Executive in order to bring that matter to a conclusion. Yes, it is the case that what is on the table today is a little less than what was on the table historically. That is the case. In order to create the certainty and to move down the road, however, my view was that the transfer of functions had to be defined. So, that matter was resolved.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has undertaken a review of a number of functions within her Department, and, on the far side of that review, there might be some opportunity for functions to transfer, subject to the view of the Minister. That said, you could argue that DOE could have transferred more functions. However, my view was that the scale of what we were doing was already of sufficient size and that where we are is where we should be. I see that there will be opportunities to do a bit more in DOE on the far side of 2016, especially when it comes to the heritage asset.

I spoke to the Secretary of State on Thursday a week ago, and I have spoken to the commissioner appointed to take forward the work on district electoral areas. I told them that nothing other than the fact that the European election date, which appears in the European calendar as 22 May next year, and the date of the shadow council elections have to be one and the same, was on my radar, had ever been part of my conversation or had been part of the narrative that I have been sharing. Even within the past very short space of time, I have made it very firmly clear to the commissioner, Mr Mackenzie, and to others that that has always been the premise on which we have been proceeding. I trust that that will not be contradicted at a political level or at a procedural level.

Mr Elliott: I know that the Minister has gone some way to give us detail on how the financial aspect of the transfer of functions will work, but he indicated something about councils finding a way to make it work. Has the Department any plan in place to ensure that the ratepayer will not have an extra burden of finances added on to their rates bill every year for the transfer of functions?

Mr Attwood: If you look at the statement that I have just outlined, you will see that an Ulster Unionist Minister is transferring functions, a

number of DUP Ministers are transferring functions, Sinn Féin Ministers are transferring functions, and I am transferring functions. If we do not ensure that our own Ministers live up to their Executive decision when it comes to the transfer and the funding of transfer, it shows a lack of authority in respect of the political parties. Obviously, the Alliance Party may have a different view on that because it is not proposing a transfer. However, the Minister of Justice, Mr Ford, is very much involved in issues around community planning, because, when it comes to community safety, community planning is going to be an opportunity that, heretofore, was not there.

There have been a lot of politics around RPA. It seems to me that the job of politicians and parties is to ensure that we now get that done, on time and right, in the terms that have been outlined. When it comes to the latter criteria, we need to ensure that Ministers do not let down ratepayers because that will be thrown back in our faces.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement and for his kind comments about my colleague and friend Councillor Robinson.

I was slightly worried when the Minister referred to points of no return and going full steam ahead. It conjured up an image of the Titanic heading towards the iceberg. Hopefully, we can have a much more productive response than that.

The Minister clearly identified the funding arrangements for the transfer of functions from central to local government. He has rightly identified that that should be done on a cost-neutral basis. What work is ongoing to establish a formula for that money to transfer effectively from central to local government? It would be helpful if the Minister were to indicate publicly whether that formula will be by way of a shift in the burden between the regional rate and the local rate or some form of annual grant. Clarification on that would be welcomed by local government.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. The DOE and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) are taking forward a number of financial issues. Sometimes, DFP leads. Clearly, some financial issues will be taken forward by individual transferring Departments because they know their own details better than I do. How do we create certainty on all that? First, I hope that Ministers will comply with the Executive decision that, by May 2013, they will have confirmed details with me. I will then confirm

those details with the Committee to give that more shape and substance. I say to Ms Lo that I will send the Committee many more details on all that. On the far side of 31 May, there will be more details on staffing and financial issues in respect of the transfer of functions.

Subject to that, I want there to be one approach across transferring Departments; I made that point at the Executive. I do not want more than one approach to the model of transfer. There have been indications that that might become an issue, and I do not want that. Although there must be one model of transfer that is consistent for staff, the trade union interest, legal obligations and so on, it must not be a one-size-fits-all approach. We are dealing with multiple councils and a lot of staff. Therefore, it has to be dealt with intimately and sensitively, but, nonetheless one model for the transfer.

Secondly, there is a big piece of ongoing work on how we will allocate the £30 million for rates convergence from the £48 million that the Executive have allocated to the RPA. It is likely that we will need a new law in the Assembly to ensure that that is modelled properly.

Thirdly, Mr Weir encouraged me to answer affirmatively about whether there will be an adjustment to the regional rate or annual negotiation on a grant for the transfer of functions. My firm view is that it will be the former. We need some adjustment in the regional rate to create certainty for local councils going forward, rather than the shadow of uncertainty that is created by annual negotiation of grants.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Guidhim rath agus bláth ar do chuid oibre mar Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish you well, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, in your work ahead.

Will the Minister detail what resources or capacity will be invested in the community and voluntary sector, perhaps from a departmental or wider Executive point of view, to allow the sector to play a full role in the community-planning process, which is well defined in his statement?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. If we think that we can create this new statutory responsibility for community planning and then abandon councils to it, we are wrong because we will not have transferred fit-for-purpose planning powers, and we will have let down the communities to which Mr McElduff referred. Having the power to make planning decisions, decide on local

development and do community planning — those three legs — is an enormous opportunity to shape communities and council areas in a way that citizens, communities and businesses need and that creates growth on the far side of that. We must not delude ourselves: we have to do this right to maximise the opportunities on the far side of 2015.

That is why the work being taken forward in scoping out training for councillors and management is not stand-alone work by the DOE and local councils. Integrated into that will be the conversation with Community Places. Why? Community Places is, in my view, integral to scoping out training for councillors. We provide it with grant funding every year, and we have enhanced its grant funding in forthcoming years because we recognise that we should be seen to support community input into planning generally.

I know the nature of the staff and the character of Community Places as an organisation, so you can rest assured that it will bring Mr McElduff's concern into the room. Community Places will be very assertive in saying that this is not about how planning will be done in the future; it is about how you engage with the community and integrate local communities in community planning and the wider planning function of local councils. Community Places will, if nothing else, keep us on our toes and, hopefully, ensure that Mr McElduff's concern does not materialise.

Mr Ross: I think it true to say that local communities can benefit from decisions being taken at as low a level as possible. The Minister, in his statement, mentioned that, in April 2016, there will be a review of the transfer of functions from central to local government. Will he indicate to the House whether he sees any further powers being devolved from central to local level after that date?

Mr Attwood: I do not want to second-guess any Minister on what may or may not transpire between here and there, except to say that, as I indicated, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure is undertaking a review of certain functions in her Department, and that might mature into the transfer of some function. From DOE's point of view, where I probably have a little bit more authority, what I can say is that we had a discussion about whether we would transfer some Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) assets to local councils and whether they should take over the management of, for example, country parks.

Given the time frames that we are working to and the scale of what we are already doing in DOE, with the transfer of planning functions having the single biggest impact, I decided that, although I would like to have that conversation, I did not think that this was the right time to create further work in the run down to 2015. The new chief executive of NIEA is taking forward some pilot innovation work, as he calls it, and part of that — this will be of interest to the Member for East Antrim — involves working with Carrickfergus Borough Council to see how, with the local council, we can better manage Carrickfergus Castle, which NIEA currently manages. I am not saying that the function of and responsibility for the castle will pass to the council on the far side of 2016, but let us see where that pilot innovation goes and whether it is a better model.

In my view, some local heritage assets are better managed locally than centrally. The council has a better local sense of the castle, how to market it and how to maximise opportunities around it. At the moment, 50,000 people a year go to the castle, which is a very low number given its quality. Last week, people from America went round various places here and were more impressed by Dunluce than the Causeway stones, but, more than anything else, they were impressed by the castle because there is nothing like it in many places. It was designed in a way that meant that there is no castle like it; you can actually have a touch-and-feel experience there. You can feel the body armour that people wore way back as opposed to its being behind some glass. So, there are marketing possibilities that I think that local councils might be better at doing. Carrickfergus Castle is one such example, which is why we are taking forward the pilot. Out of that pilot, we might create more opportunities with heritage assets for that council and others.

4.15 pm

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Déanaim comhghairdeas leat as an phost nua. Will the d'Hondt system be used in the transfer of powers to the local authorities to allocate positions to the committees?

Mr Attwood: Under the clauses of the reorganisation Bill, which is currently in circulation, councils will be required to allocate positions in and outside councils on the basis of a proportional system. They will have the freedom to decide from a menu of proportional systems, but, in the absence of agreement on any other position, the default will be d'Hondt.

Therefore, it will be embedded in law that all councils should comply with a proportionality principle. In the absence of agreement on which system should be used, d'Hondt will be the legal default.

I do not understand why there are still councils that do not subscribe to that principle voluntarily. The Executive have agreed the policy proposals on how positions will be distributed after 2015, and I trust that they will endorse the draft reorganisation Bill in the next number of weeks before it comes to the Chamber for First Reading and Second Reading, which will hopefully be before recess. How can politicians and parties endorse that approach at Executive level but not comply with it voluntarily in councils, which is the case at the moment? That is beyond me.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his statement. It certainly helps to see what is planned, although I notice that some Departments have clawed back functions from the initial plans. Will the Minister clarify exactly what is anticipated will happen to local enterprise agencies and to Invest Northern Ireland under the proposal?

Mr Attwood: As I indicated in my comments, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment agreed to transfer a number of local economic development activities. Those are: the starting a business programme and enterprise shows; youth entrepreneurship; social entrepreneurship; Investing for Women; and neighbourhood renewal funding that is related to enterprise initiatives. There is also a range of tourism issues. As I indicated to the Chair, I will provide the detail of those to the Member and the Committee.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he throw some light on the benefits and efficiencies that may be created by the transfer of off-street parking? Will the property that is involved transfer to the local councils?

Mr Attwood: That is a very good question to which I do not have a very good answer at this stage. So, I will come back to the Member.

Mr Beggs: I congratulate you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, on your appointment. The Minister indicated that there is potential in the future for better working between his Department and local councils. He mentioned Carrickfergus Castle. Does he accept that, even at the moment, there is no reason why his

Department could not look after the fabric of the building while local government looks after its day-to-day management? The local tourist infrastructure could then better respond to the needs of the market and attract more tourism.

Mr Attwood: I support the sentiment of the question. There will be opportunities post-review 2016 to escalate the functions that might be transferred to local councils. I regret a little that what was on the table historically is no longer on the table, although there are still very substantial functions to be transferred. I go back to the point that I made earlier: the model of merger and transfer of functions has not been deployed in many jurisdictions.

It is particularly challenging here, given that we are doing both on the same day and at the same moment. I believe that there will be opportunities. However, given our scale, historical certainty, the delays in the Executive with respect to the money before we got to this situation and that the transfer of functions paper has taken a little bit of time to mature and come to the Floor for consideration, I do not believe, from a DOE point of view, that more than what we are doing is appropriate at this stage. As an amber light for what might happen in future, we will roll out, for example, the pilot that I mentioned for Carrickfergus Castle. There will be multiple other opportunities.

There has been some resistance in councils and some delay around clusters taking this work forward and getting it up to speed. Given all that and while there may have been some enhancements, I think that the transfer of functions that are on the table is broadly right at this time.

Mr Allister: Over the years that we have discussed RPA, various figures for the savings have been bandied about — £400 million was a common headline. Where does that stand? Where do other propositions, such as a single waste authority, stand? What is the cost to date of RPA and what will be the cost?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I touched on the issue of waste procurement during Question Time earlier. I have told the waste management board that, in my view, there should be a single waste authority. Given that we will have 11 councils and that we have a population of 1.9 million, a single waste authority is appropriate for the North. Indeed, given the waste needs of the island, the opportunity to manage our waste on the island and exploit opportunities, including business opportunities for recyclates, we need

to consider how we might do more of that on the island. Minister Hogan in the South and I recently appointed David Surplus, a known commercial expert in renewables, as chair of the North/South Market Development Steering Group. When I met him 10 days ago, he indicated that he thought there was a lot of "low-hanging fruit" — to use his words — in waste opportunities.

However, I have also told the waste management board that, although that is my view of where we should go, in the first instance we have to exhaust the ongoing procurement exercises in respect of which SWaMP has collapsed, the North West Region Waste Management Group is getting close to final bidder status and Arc21 is having a pre-application discussion with the community and the Planning Service about any future planning application that it may choose to make. For legal and procurement reasons we have to exhaust that exercise. If, on the far side of that, we end up with one — or perhaps two — waste procurement body, so be it. My view is that a single waste authority would be appropriate.

There will be savings. However, even if we did no reorganisation, multiple savings are available. In August 2011, local councils produced a proposal, whereby, over a 25-year period — I stand to be corrected on this — savings of £265 million could be made through the sharing and collaboration of services. I could give you multiple examples, whether with electricity tenders, insurance or stationery contracts, of councils clustering together — not all councils, but sometimes up to 22 councils — to bring about more efficiencies and savings.

There was the example of the e-auction for a stationery contract in Belfast that, in the course of a couple of hours, saw costs de-escalate and the contract eventually being awarded to a local business. There are savings to be made, irrespective of the RPA merger around ICE. I have asked the senior people involved in the ICE strategy to see me so that I may, to borrow a phrase that I often use, interrogate them further about where they are going with ICE. I think that there is a lot more to be done — a bit like David Surplus said about renewables. There is low-hanging fruit when it comes to sharing of and collaboration in council services that could see cost reductions and benefits to the ratepayer.

The Member mentioned the cost to date of the council reform programme. I am going back into the recesses of my mind, but I think that the figure is something around £14 million. I am not seeing any nods of agreement to your right,

Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will have to confirm that in writing. However, there have been significant costs to date. I will speak to officials and let the Member know immediately thereafter.

Private Members' Business

Special Needs Provision: Further Education and Training

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of provision for individuals with severe learning difficulties leaving special needs education at 19 years of age; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to expand the provision of support staff and develop the assistance needed to encourage the uptake of further education and training, thereby allowing more engagement with society. — [Lord Morrow.]

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): First, I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I apologise for missing the start of Lord Morrow's speech. I was undertaking other ministerial duties upstairs, and time moved on quicker than I expected. I also thank all Members who contributed to the debate.

I join others in recognising the immensely difficult daily circumstances that people with learning disabilities, and, indeed, their families, face. My vision, which I know that many share, is for a cohesive, shared and integrated society in which people are safe and prosperous, have ample opportunities, and are treated fairly and with respect and equality.

I acknowledge the considerable concern about the transition that occurs at age 19 for a lot of young people with special needs. Although my Department and others have a range of policies and programmes in place, I acknowledge that there may well be gaps in provision and that there are things that we can consider doing differently and, indeed, better. I am happy to follow up on concerns that were raised during the debate and in a meeting with a number of parents that Lord Morrow organised for this afternoon.

The Executive's new disability strategy was launched in February, and it adopts the social model of disability. It reflects the principles and obligations in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It outlines the Executive's strategic priorities and, in particular, identifies a strategic theme on the transition from childhood to adulthood. The Executive have committed themselves to transforming the process of transition to adulthood for young people with disabilities.

My Department is working to support the strategy and to make a real difference to educational and employment opportunities for people with learning difficulties. On top of the economic benefits associated with greater social inclusion, there is a moral imperative. Every young person, regardless of individual circumstances, should have the opportunity to engage in learning and development that will help them to participate, achieve and progress in life.

I reassure Members that social inclusion is reinforced in all my Department's main strategies. In working towards a more inclusive society, my Department complies fully with all statutory equality and disability requirements. We ensure that all policies are assessed for significant impact on equality of opportunity. The Department's services ensure that the needs of all people with special needs or disabilities are identified and addressed in an appropriate manner. Care is taken to ensure that our services and facilities are open to people with disabilities and can be accessed by them. We are open to constructive engagement and feedback on how those services can be improved. As such, I welcome today's debate.

The Department plays a critical role in supporting young people with severe learning disabilities through advice and guidance. It has developed and implemented a social inclusion policy to address the needs of young people who face or are vulnerable to social exclusion. It has established working relationships with the relevant statutory, voluntary and community sector bodies with a shared interest in supporting clients who are vulnerable to social exclusion.

Partnership agreements are in place with post-primary schools, including special schools, to support their careers education programmes. Those agreements allow the schools the opportunity to select from a suite of services that are appropriate to the pupils' needs. Careers advisers attend transition-planning meetings for year 10 pupils and subsequent annual reviews. That allows young people and their parents or guardians to make informed decisions about the options available to them on leaving school.

Careers advisers work with multidisciplinary teams, including teachers and educational psychologists, to develop transitional plans. Those are developed by the implementation of the joint Department of Education (DE) and Department for Learning and Employment (DEL) careers strategy. The strategy

recognises that people who are vulnerable to social exclusion have high priority career guidance needs, and that specialist skills are required for that area of work. In turn, the strategy is due for review in 2014, and we will be happy to take up any additional points that we need to as part of that review.

4.30 pm

Turning to employment support, the Department manages and delivers a range of pan-disability employment services and programmes aimed at helping people to progress towards, move into, and sustain meaningful paid work. Young adults leaving special schools should find those services beneficial. A team of occupational psychologists assist employment advisers and carry out employment assessments for individual clients.

There are a number of employment support programmes to assist individuals and employers. Access to Work helps towards travel costs, residential training, support workers, specialist equipment and adaptations to premises. The Workable programme aims to help people with a disability who have a substantial employment barrier to find or retain work. It provides assistance such as a job coach, financial help for employers, extra training and disability awareness training. Of the 418 employees availing of support, 232 have a learning difficulty or learning disability.

Work Connect is a new specialist employment programme that aims to help people to overcome their health-related and/or disability-related barriers to work and to support them to make the transition from welfare into employment. It is delivered by a consortium of seven local disability organisations, some of which specialise in support for people with a learning disability. The Department has developed strong and positive working relationships with the local disability sector and values the contribution that all of those organisations make in helping to support some of our most vulnerable young people. One example is the Department's ongoing sponsorship of Ulster Supported Employment Ltd, in its capacity as the largest employer of people with a disability in Northern Ireland, and which also happens to be a key provider of disability employment services.

The European social fund programme assists unemployed and economically inactive people towards sustained employment. It helps groups experiencing difficulty in obtaining employment or maintaining sustained employment, including

people with disabilities. Currently there are 20 projects that target participants with disabilities or health conditions, including a large number of people with learning disabilities who are receiving support from organisations that specialise in their disability. Mervyn Storey raised an issue about whether the European social fund is being deployed for that purpose, and, indeed, it is.

A good example of the work being done is a project being taken forward by NOW in Belfast and Stepping Stones in Lisburn. Their project aims to provide employment support and training places to people with learning disabilities. I regularly meet people who have benefited from the work of these organisations, and the positive difference that they make to people's lives is very clear.

With respect to further education, colleges are responsible for determining their own provision and compliance with their statutory obligation to have regard to the requirements of persons of compulsory school-leaving age who have learning difficulties. Colleges are also required to make reasonable adjustments to allow students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities access both to their premises and the mainstream curriculum.

All further education students enrolling with a learning difficulty and/or disability at a college undergo an educational needs assessment, which determines the level of additional support required to meet the particular needs of their disability and course of study. Colleges review agreed additional support twice-yearly to ensure that it remains appropriate and to allow the students to be involved in their own assistance and progression.

However, mainstream further education courses are not always suitable for everyone — for example, those people with complex health and social care needs. It is for that reason that colleges collaborate with special schools and adult day centres to provide customised training and development opportunities on discrete, vocational and life skills courses for young people with moderate or severe learning difficulties. These courses may be offered in the college, at a day centre or in other suitable premises. I am happy to do an audit of our further education provision across not just the colleges but all the campuses to ensure that we have uniformity in terms of the standards that are provided in the sector.

The Department also provides colleges with £1.5 million per annum through the additional support fund to help them meet the cost of

providing additional technical and/or personal support that is required for students. A further £2 million a year is made available to help meet the cost of providing reduced classroom sizes, additional lecturer contact time, classroom assistants or any other services that are involved in the delivery of tailored, discrete courses for those students for whom mainstream courses are not always appropriate.

The degree of support that is available in further education for students with disabilities is intended to be reasonable and can involve a judgement of what is proportionate and affordable. For students with severe disabilities, the educational element can be overshadowed by medical and personal assistance considerations. In those circumstances, while the colleges might have a contributory role, primary care responsibility must remain with the health and social care authorities.

I will turn now to higher education. The Department's Access to Success strategy for widening participation aims to expand the outreach activities of higher education institutions in order to promote higher education to young people with learning disabilities, and their parents and advocates, through a programme of informative presentations and workshops led by disabled students and graduates.

To assist persons with a learning difficulty to access higher education, funding is available through the disabled students allowance to help pay the extra costs that may be incurred because of a specific learning difficulty. This covers issues such as the cost of a non-medical support provider, major items of specialist equipment and travel. The Department also pays a widening access premium to universities and university colleges for students with learning difficulties. The purpose of the premium is to cover the cost of specialist equipment and/or specific support for these students.

I will turn now to professional and technical training. The Training for Success programme provides a guaranteed training place for all unemployed young people in the 16-17 age bracket, and up to age 22 for those with special educational needs. The programme provides a pre-entry training support referral for school leavers with a learning disability. Clients are referred to contracted specialist support providers who specialise in disability and learning support. All programme participants receive a non-means-tested educational

maintenance allowance of £40 a week and assistance towards the costs of travel. Specialist support funding of up to £1,000 a year can also be accessed.

My Department also leads on the new Pathways to Success strategy for young people who are not in employment, education or training. A range of new initiatives has been developed, including the new education maintenance allowance, the collaboration and innovation fund and the community family support programme.

Addressing disability needs, however, is a responsibility for the whole Executive. To take this forward, the Executive will look to the disability strategy and the delivering social change programme to begin early intervention in those areas that will require cross-departmental action. There is also much work being undertaken by different Departments at both strategic and operational level. I will briefly outline some of that.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety works closely with my Department and the Department of Education on transitions, day care provision, supported employment and day opportunities for people with learning disabilities. The children and young people's strategic partnership is a regional cross-sector strategic partnership, consisting of the leadership of key agencies who have responsibility for improving outcomes for all children and young people. Its purpose is to lead integrated planning and the commissioning of services aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people regionally.

A number of regional subgroups have been established to address the needs of specific groups of children and young people. One of those subgroups, of which my Department is an active member, is the transitions subgroup. The implementation of this group's action plan will bring a more consistent and strategic approach to the way we plan, design and deliver our services.

To assist young people with learning disabilities during transition from childhood to adult services, the health and social care trusts have appointed transitions co-ordinators, who provide transition plans for people who are making the move from children's services into adult services.

In the education sector, the education and library boards have in place education transition co-ordinators to ensure a person-centred approach and strengthen the transition planning

process. The boards are required to produce a transition plan at the first, and subsequent, annual review of the statement of special educational needs following the young person's fourteenth birthday. It aims to plan coherently for the change when a young person moves from school to adult life. Parents are routinely invited to transition planning meetings to discuss key issues relating to the young person's special educational needs. The Department of Education and the boards work closely with the Health Department and my Department on transition planning.

Like Lord Morrow, I fear that I am running out of time. There is much more that could be said. It is important that we have had this debate. I want to assure Members and parents that this is not the end of the process. This is not a debate that will stay on the shelf but will serve to spark renewed activity by not just my Department but, hopefully, other Departments and the entire Executive to ensure that we address this issue, which is so important for so many people across Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir: At the start of the debate, Lord Morrow quoted my indication to him that I felt that this is a subject on which there should not be any division. I am glad that the House has responded in a manner that proves that, at least on this issue, neither Lord Morrow nor myself is a liar. The support from around the Chamber is welcome. We have had a very constructive, sober and focused debate on an important topic. While I have no problem with debates that stir up high levels of passion and division, which we often have in the Chamber, the fact that this debate has not been a ding-dong between either side is significant. While it is important that there is vigorous debate, I hope that the media and the public will give proper attention to a debate such as this.

This is a matter of key concern. I was struck by one of the themes that emerged in the contributions of a number of Members. Ms McGahan, for instance, made reference to fear; for example, the fear of carers and the fear of people with special needs about dealing with employment situations. If there is one thing that we need to do and one message that we need to send out, it is to take action that removes that fear.

One of the most telling comments that shows the significance of the issue was made by Pat Ramsey. He gave the very clear example of some parents going very much against the norm by saying, "I hope that my child dies before me, because I fear so much what will happen to them after I am gone." We should

take away that message and keep it in our mind constantly to ensure, as the Minister put it, that this is not something that simply stays on the shelf. It is something that we need to embrace.

One of the other key themes that emerged from the debate is that, while it has obviously focused on the Minister for Employment and Learning, this is something in which collaboration is key to finding a lot of the solutions. It is very telling that we had contributions not only from the Minister for Employment and Learning but three Committee Chairs: the Chair of the Employment and Learning Committee, Mr Swann; the Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Storey; and, in an intervention, the Chair of the Health Committee, Ms Ramsey. It is important to highlight, as the Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning and the Chair of the Education Committee did, the positive work being done not just in the Chamber and the Department but at Committee level to ensure that there is a focus on this issue.

One of the key issues that came up is transition. Whereas there is a very clear and strong provision to try to ensure that there is protection up to the age of 19, the issue is how people move from that position into adult life. There has been mention of proposals in other parts of the United Kingdom to move towards a more integrated plan and to take the age up to either 24 or 25, depending on the situation. That would be a very welcome development here, although I will add three riders. First, with no disrespect to the current Government across the water, where provision is made elsewhere and then integrated, there is always the suspicion that it will become simply an excuse to cut services. We have to ensure that there is a proper level of provision.

4.45 pm

Secondly, in providing those plans, we have to accept that people with severe learning difficulties cannot be catered for with a one-size-fits-all approach: there has to be flexibility in any approach that is taken. A plan that moves into the mid-20s is something to be valued and welcomed, but it is important that there are proper exit strategies when it comes to funding and support — that it is not simply a question of providing some degree of additional support for another few years for the problem to be pushed down the pipe and the person to fall off the edge at the end of that period.

Mention was also made by Lord Morrow and others that, whereas there is a considerable amount of help out there, in many ways there is

a patchy quality to provision across Northern Ireland. There can be regional variations, including from one council area to another. We have to ensure that, in adopting a strategy and implementing it, we do not have a postcode lottery and that the level of provision and support does not vary from area to area. We need to ensure that whatever strategies we put forward are time-bound and implementable.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree that the House is united on this subject.

The Minister said, when talking about the transition to education, that families and others who wish to avail themselves of provision should have education available to them. The words should be "will have" not "should have". Does the Member agree that that is part of the problem? Does he agree that, in a lot of cases, it is nearly like a postcode lottery and that there is a difference in the provision in rural and urban areas? The provision in rural areas needs to be looked at that bit more because of, for example, transport and availability of education campuses in those areas.

Mr Weir: I agree in the broad sense. We have to make sure that there is no particular division, whether it is between urban and rural provision or between provision in one town in one part of Northern Ireland and that in another town in another part of Northern Ireland. There should be proper provision made for everyone.

Mention has been made of education and employment, which is vital as we move forward. Mention was made by Mr Ramsey of the difficulties in securing employment. Unfortunately, one of the by-products of recent years, when globally we have moved into recession, has been that the opportunity for employers to provide the necessary level of support has sometimes been lacking. That is where the state needs to step in and make sure that the support is there.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will, briefly.

Mr P Ramsey: I will be brief. Does the Member agree that, because of the diversity and complexity of some people with learning disabilities, there is a need for an individually tailored programme of training?

Mr Weir: That is where there needs to be commitment and flexibility, because the solution cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach.

Mention was made by a number of Members, including Mr Storey and Mr Flanagan, of the need to have meaningful and purposeful outcomes and to focus on solutions. A range of solutions have been offered today. Obviously, a sustainable approach is needed. Practical suggestions were made, such as when Mr Storey talked about ensuring that there is tracking and monitoring of students with special educational needs to make sure that there are proper outcomes.

A number of Members, including Mr Douglas and Mr Lyttle, made specific reference to the work at a community level and voluntary level. There is good work ongoing, and there is good work being done by the Department. In tabling the motion, we are not being so churlish as to not admit that there have been considerable improvements down the years. Fortunately, we have moved on from the situation many years ago where those with learning needs were quite often shut away, treated in an institution and often treated by society as a form of embarrassment. We have moved a long way from that, but it is important that, having made that transition, we take the next step-change and ensure that those with special educational needs are given the proper degree of support.

It is also the case, and a number of Members raised this, that we need to ensure that information on the services available is properly communicated. In many cases, there are a range of provisions that, at times, people are not fully aware of. So, there is a job of work to be done on communication.

Mr Storey said that the mark of a civilised society is how it looks after its most vulnerable. This is a key test for us. I welcome the Minister's remarks that this is not the end of the debate but merely, effectively, a staging post towards better implementation and that it will not simply be a debate whereby the Hansard report sits on a shelf gathering dust. It is a key challenge for the Assembly to provide the support that is needed to those with severe learning needs and their families, and I welcome what I believe will be the unanimous support of the Assembly for the motion. However, we need to ensure that it moves beyond a motion and into real action on the ground that delivers for those people in our society. Therefore, I urge the House to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the lack of provision for individuals with severe learning difficulties leaving special needs education at 19 years of age; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to expand the provision of support staff and develop the assistance needed to encourage the uptake of further education and training, thereby allowing more engagement with society.

Adjourned at 4.51 pm.



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