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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 May 2013

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mr David McIlveen replace Mr Sammy Douglas as a member of the Public Accounts Committee; that Mr Sammy Douglas replace Mr Sydney Anderson as a member of the Committee for Social Development; that Mr Sydney Anderson replace Mr Alastair Ross as a member of the Committee for the Environment; and that Mr Sydney Anderson replace Mr David McIlveen as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr Weir.]

Ministerial Statement

Residential Care for Older People

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Statements are available for any Member who did not get it outdoors. I apologise that, due to the bank holiday weekend, we did not get them out as quickly this morning as we would have liked to.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on the important matter of the proposed closure of statutory residential care homes for older people. My primary focus is the well-being and treatment of older people, and I do not want to see any older person distressed or worried about their future. However, I know that several older people have been upset by the proposed changes, and I want to take the opportunity to record my apology to them for any unintentional stress that may have been generated by these consultation proposals.

Although we in the Assembly could have a long debate about the facts and figures that have been reported, that is not what is important. What is important is that we move forward now with a clear policy on and process for achieving the successful implementation of that policy. No one can disagree with the policy that home is the hub of care. However, how we achieve that needs to be carefully planned and communicated. Those older people who currently reside in statutory residential homes need to be listened to and treated with sensitivity and dignity.

There was never any question of making anyone homeless or enforcing change in any draconian way. It was very unfortunate that the clear positive intentions of the policy became lost in the distressing sequence of stories over the past two weeks. It is now essential that we put public assurance and confidence at the top of the agenda. I also hope that some of the positive changes that trusts proposed can

proceed. That is because their intention, and mine, remains to actually improve services and to move away from a model of care that is no longer the best that is available and that involves many people living in homes that are not anything like up to the standard that any of us would expect.

On Friday 3 May, I met with senior members of the Health and Social Care (HSC) Board and trusts. I told them that it was unacceptable that any older person or their families should be left upset by the process of consultation on closure of residential homes. I indicated to the HSC that the policy has not and will not change. I now want to state clearly to Assembly Members that I am in full support of the Transforming Your Care (TYC) approach regarding the care of older people, which is to promote independence, social inclusion, reablement and support in the community for as long as possible. However, the process of engagement with older people, their families and the public has to change. The pace of change needs to be planned in a co-ordinated way across all the trusts. That was not clear. Therefore, on Friday 3 May I called a halt to individual trusts consulting on proposed closures in their areas. We will now make a fresh start.

I have asked the HSC Board to lead on a new process for consulting and implementing change. I expect the board to work closely with trusts to co-ordinate a regional approach on residential care homes, with trusts having more time to engage with individuals, families, communities and staff. There will be a regional approach to the future provision of statutory residential care. Consultation on change will still be necessary, but the pace of change will be clearly defined and is likely to be over a longer period.

However, I accept that trusts should be able to decide not to admit new permanent residents to particular statutory homes. Some have done so already, and others propose to take such action. That is sensible, as there is plenty of capacity in the system to meet all residential care needs. It must be remembered that HSC does not provide any residential nursing care. At present, less than 25% of statutory residential care is provided by HSC organisations.

The new process for engagement will be led by Fionnuala McAndrew, the director of social services at the Health and Social Care Board. I will want assurance from the board that best practice will be followed in the future development of proposals for closure, engagement and delivery of change. That will

include communication and engagement with individuals, families and staff; that the needs of individuals will be addressed in any proposed change and their wishes will be listened to; that any proposed change will be in line with policy, the pace of change will be clear, appropriate and in line with policy; and, where change is proposed, there will be clear assurance that better alternatives are being offered in all cases. Oversight from the Department's chief social services officer, Seán Holland, will also provide me with further assurance.

In conclusion, I emphasise that every older person is important to me. Over time, I want a better service for all older people. Achieving that will require change in the model of service provision. I want the management of that change to be as smooth as possible and for those who are affected at present, albeit that they are small in number — around 330 in total — to have time to voice their opinions and to be listened to. I expect their wishes to be respected. No one's care will be put in jeopardy.

I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call Sue Ramsey, the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I warn all Members that we have quite an exhaustive list this morning. Quite a number of Members from all parties want to make contributions on the statement. That is understandable. However, I expect Members to come to their questions quickly. Let us not have further statements. I call Sue Ramsey. Of course, the Committee Chairperson has some latitude.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. I think that the statement is very useful, but the reality is that there is still a lot of confusion out there among families and, indeed, among those currently in residential homes.

Minister, in your statement, you talk about a fresh start. Is that only in this process of Transforming Your Care? If the board and the trusts got it wrong at this stage, how can we be reassured that they will get it right at other stages of Transforming Your Care?

Also, we have been informed through the media that, according to a relative, Jean Faulkner has been told that her home will not close and that you have given a guarantee. Was that guarantee given, or will it be given, to other residents in other homes?

Finally, Minister, you indicated that you were not informed about this until — I think that you said — last Wednesday. Were any senior officials either on the HSC Board or in your Department informed about it?

Mr Poots: OK. First, I think that we need to deal with this confusion; a lot of people out there wish there to be confusion and wish to keep stirring up confusion and causing concern. The current process has been halted — end of. I believe that the current process got out of kilter with Transforming Your Care, and, as a consequence, I decided that the process needed to be halted.

As regards how we look to the future, we need to stop, take our time and identify the best way forward. In circumstances where better care is provided, people will be made aware of that. Homes that are not admitting new residents will lose numbers relatively quickly over the next two to three years, and, consequently, decisions will have to be taken about those facilities. At this moment, however, none is proposed for closure. Some of them will have considerably fewer numbers in due course, and, consequently, there will be a discussion with the remaining residents in those circumstances to provide them as individuals with the best possible care.

As regards the management of this, I think that we will have to take a closer role in dealing with it than was the case. The fact that this was reported to us by the health and social care trusts as opposed to their asking for our opinion in the first instance was, I think, somewhat unfortunate. Perhaps I will deal with that more at a later point.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that the Health Committee, on many occasions, and the Assembly accepted the broad thrust of 'Transforming Your Care' and that many said privately that it is the best way forward for health and social services in Northern Ireland? That being the case, will he explain where this decision on residential homes now leaves that very important document?

Mr Poots: We are still committed to Transforming Your Care. I note people talking about a U-turn; I can assure the House that there is no U-turn on our policy of Transforming Your Care.

What we want to do is provide better quality care for elderly residents. Some people may wish to have elderly residents cared for in homes in which they have a tiny room and in

which six or eight people have to share the same bathroom and toilet facilities. I can tell you this: I do not want that type of care for any of my family or, indeed, myself. I want a better quality of care. That is what Transforming Your Care is about. There are facilities that have a poor capital infrastructure but which provide excellent personal care because of the individuals who work in them. However, this will inevitably lead to better quality facilities being produced. We want to ensure that the care that goes along with those facilities is sustained and, if possible, enhanced even further.

So, we are absolutely and totally committed to Transforming Your Care, because it is the right way for older people, and we will not be deflected from that policy.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that, for over a year, I have been raising the law of unintended consequences around Transforming Your Care — the stealth privatisation of large parts of our Health and Social Care system. Does the Minister agree that the time has come to bring forward legislation to the House to ensure that what is good about Transforming Your Care goes ahead and that we do not have to return to this place to explain why unelected, unaccountable public servants have taken decisions —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr McDevitt: — that are not consistent with the wishes or will of the House?

10.45 am

Mr Poots: What happened last week is a completely different issue to that of privatisation. Last week, people went about their jobs in such a way as to cause distress to elderly people. I find that unacceptable. All our nursing care for the elderly is provided by the private sector. If the Member wishes us to build new homes, do away with the private sector's provision and employ people in the health service, he is free to make that proposal and identify where the funding will come from.

Only around 25% of residential care for the elderly is provided in the statutory sector, with 75% being in the private sector. People perceive the privatisation of the health service as meaning that they will have to pay for their care. That is not what this is about. We do not want the public to have to pay for care. I have a forthright belief that healthcare should be free

at the point of need for all. It is a universal concept, and I will resist any attempt to privatise healthcare in that respect. However, I will use the private sector when it can provide good quality services to the public, and I will not shirk from doing so.

Mr Beggs: The Minister apologised for the unintentional stress that he caused to residents of statutory care homes and for the lack of sensitivity and dignity in the way in which these vulnerable people have been treated. Will he advise us why they were not treated with sensitivity and dignity, and who is accountable for that?

Mr Poots: Mr Beggs's silly remark implies that I personally went in and caused distress in these homes. Let me make it absolutely clear: I got an e-mail on Wednesday informing me of what the Northern Trust intended to do on the Thursday. That was the first time that we knew: it was a heads-up. The Ulster Unionist Party is suffering from a little amnesia, so let me further explain that the current policy on trusts, the establishment of the existing trusts and their authority were established by none other than the Minister before me: Michael McGimpsey of the Ulster Unionist Party. I have listened to members of the Ulster Unionist Party, particularly the leader, over the past few days, and they clearly do not understand the responsibilities given to the trusts by their Health Minister. If they do not — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister must be heard.

Mr Poots: If they do not, it is somewhat embarrassing for that party. Perhaps Mr McGimpsey can give them a lesson on what it actually means.

The steps that I took on Friday were unprecedented because it is the responsibility of the trusts to do what they were doing. I stepped in and used ministerial authority to stop it, but it is very clearly the responsibility of the trusts. They were at liberty to do what they were doing as a result of the way in which they were established by the Ulster Unionist Minister. The Ulster Unionists set up the trusts and established them in this way, so on their own heads be it. I sought to resolve the situation.

Mr McCarthy: Every Member of the House and, indeed, the community at large will agree that last week was harrowing and horrendous for our senior residents in care homes.

Mr Speaker: I hope that that is not a statement that the Member has.

Mr McCarthy: Not at all, Mr Speaker.

It was totally unnecessary, and I welcome the Minister's statement in which he said that he put a halt to the process on Friday. Does the Minister agree or suspect that the three trusts that announced the total closure of our care homes were attempting to torpedo the 'Transforming Your Care' document in their actions last week through the proposal to close those homes?

Mr Poots: I do not want to second-guess what the trusts were about. I believe that had the trusts been able to do what they wanted to do, they would have probably implemented things considerably more quickly because they would have released cash that allowed them to develop facilities more quickly. In the whole process, however, it does not matter how good something is further down the way: if someone is content with where they are and moving causes them distress, that has to be given huge consideration. Whoever in the trusts decided to go ahead with the proposals for 100% closure did not give enough cognisance to that. That is why we need to stop, take our breath and identify how we do this without causing the distress that we saw last week.

I agree with the Member that it is unacceptable to cause the distress that we witnessed to our elderly population. I hope that, this week, people in the media do not seek to cause undue stress to elderly people. I think that there are people who, for their own advantage and benefit, wish to cause stress to others — they should catch themselves on.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement today. I lend my full support to how the Minister has handled this very emotive issue in the last week. I put on record that I worked in social services until I got this job, and, until three or four years ago, we were being told by the then Health Minister, Mr McGimpsey, not to place people in residential care. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Will the Member come to her question?

Ms P Bradley: I will indeed, Mr Speaker. I ask the Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms P Bradley: What is the financial impact of the revised model of care?

Mr Poots: Let us be absolutely clear: we are ploughing more and more money into elderly care, and I am very happy for that to be the case. Over the past three years, £50 million of additional money has been invested in elderly care. We are putting £3 million of additional funding into reablement. Perhaps, for the benefit of the Ulster Unionist Party, I should explain what reablement means. The rest of Members here probably understand. Reablement means that when someone, for example, has a fall and breaks their femur, instead of them ending up in a care home, we ensure that they get considerably more support, which allows them to return to their own home. If someone ends up in hospital because of an acute episode, and perhaps the easy option would be for them to go into residential care, we give them that support to enable them to do things once again and regain the skills that they have lost. Elderly people want to be in their own home and with their family, so we want to support them to do that.

I am passionate about going ahead with this policy because I know that it is the right policy for our elderly population. We will not be deflected by the nonsense that we have heard over the past few days from some individuals who want to have elderly people in second- or third-rate facilities. I want our older people to be in the best possible facilities with the people whom they love around them.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is important that the Minister acknowledges today to the House that the process was a mess and that it completely disregarded the rights of the elderly population. I return to the question asked by the Chair of the Health Committee: were guarantees given to Jean Faulkner? What will that mean for others in care facilities? Can he give an absolute guarantee today that no elderly person will be forced from their home? Will that include the Slievemore nursing home facility in the city of Derry?

Mr Poots: There are a number of issues. What happened last week and how the messages went out fell way short of what we expect in the treatment of our elderly. The consequence of that was the distress caused. I have no problem whatsoever acknowledging that and apologising to our elderly population and those

close to them for the distress caused. I make that absolutely clear.

The process has been stopped, so the threat to any residential home of closure in the next six months has gone. We will engage in a process that will identify what facilities are needed in future. We will talk very caringly with the elderly population to identify how we move forward and what options are available to them. It is not a case of forcing people out of their facility. It is matter of people being made aware of what is available to them and, for many, that will mean staying in their current facility. I believe that many of the 330 people will see out their life in the facility that they live in.

The other aspect is that some of those people will have to move from residential care to nursing care, because the residential homes do not serve nursing care needs. We want to move to a model in which residential care and nursing care are provided in one facility so that, in the future, those people do not have to move. I have no control over it when someone loses their ability to stay in a residential care home because they have nursing care needs; I have no ability to support them. We want to eliminate that in the future and we need to identify that in the policy.

The decision that the Slievemore facility could no longer serve its purpose was taken by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA). I do not believe that the Western Trust had an option in that instance.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I commend him for his work to date in this difficult role of managing the change in the health service that so many people want. Within five years, it is likely that there will be more people with dementia. How will that be managed in the existing system?

Mr Poots: None of the elderly mentally infirm (EMI) facilities were involved in this. Those facilities will continue to be provided and were not included in TYC or the recent proposals from trusts.

I know that considerably more people with dementia will come forward. We have been successful in keeping people alive longer, and that is one of the consequences. People who live with dementia and their carers will have services provided to them based on assessed need; I think that that is what is most important. If they require care placements, those will be made available to them. The vast majority of those with dementia are placed in the independent sector, and capacity remains in

that sector. The secondary sector has a purpose in providing EMI support. That will continue to be the case.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. I do not want to be too repetitious, but a question was asked about an assurance being given to Jean Faulkner. Will the Minister tell us whether assurances have been given to other elderly people in other residential homes?

Mr Poots: I will have to be repetitious again. We have said very clearly that the current process has stopped. It is discontinued. If we move to a situation from here on in, a number of the trusts will not admit people to facilities. Therefore, the numbers in those facilities will diminish over time and decisions will be taken on that basis.

I have heard people suggesting that that is a deliberate run-down of those facilities, and that is a reasonable comment. We do not want second- or third-rate facilities. We want our elderly people to be cared for in the best facilities, and some of the older homes could not be refurbished without moving people out of them while we knocked them down and rebuilt them. We will not admit people to substandard facilities. That is a fact. We will seek to ensure that the care that is provided in those facilities while people are still in them is second to none, in spite of the fact that the facilities are not of the quality that we would like.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. Does he accept that, in some cases, trust officials were crass and too strong in the way that they communicated this to residents, their families and staff? I witnessed that last Wednesday in Greenfield home in Strabane. Can the Minister reassure people like Mrs Crawford, Mrs McHugh and the Murray brothers that they will not be unduly treated?

Mr Poots: I do not believe that the messages were transmitted with the sensitivity that was required, nor that the dignity that was afforded to our older people was as good as it could have been.

That disappoints me greatly, and that is why I have asked Fionnuala McAndrew to lead the team and Seán Holland, our director of social services, to oversee the work to ensure that all of it is done correctly. I have also asked that we have full consultation with and take advice from the Commissioner for Older People on how we deal with the elderly population in such circumstances.

Change can often cause concern, even change that is for the better. All of that needs to be well explained, and we need to treat older people as intelligent beings, because sometimes people talk down to older people. They are very bright and sharp and have their wits about them. We need to treat older people with respect, dignity, care and compassion. I want to see all those things being applied in my time as Minister.

11.00 am

Mr Nesbitt: I will pick up on the Minister's last answer. Will he report on any conversations he has had with the Commissioner for Older People since Claire Keatinge described the situation as being shameful and identified an abject lack of leadership?

Mr Poots: I have spoken to Claire Keatinge about what her views are. Claire Keatinge and I are largely at one on how we treat our older people. She and I found nothing that we disagreed on, so I was very happy with the conversation that I had with her and with the support that I received from her.

Mr Nesbitt has done a lot of talking in the past few days. I note that he did not call for the resignation of Mr McGimpsey when Seymour House was closed in March 2009; when Grove House was closed in December 2009; when St John's House was closed in October 2010; when Foyleville was closed in June 2010; or when Drumhaw was closed in January 2011. Mr Nesbitt talked about people being thrown onto the streets. That is the sort of language that causes distress to older people, and he would do well to apologise to the older people and to the House for the use of such language. Nobody will be put on the streets. All our elderly people will be treated with care. Mr Nesbitt would do well to hang his head in shame for his behaviour over the past few days in seeking to stir up and cause further anxiety and trauma to older people when others were trying to resolve a difficult situation
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I trust that it will provide some clarity for elderly residents and their families, who are rightly concerned about the situation. Will there still be consultation on the closure of individual care homes?

Mr Poots: That is something that we will have to have and that we will be happy to have if that is the case. Again, it is something that we need

to take our time on. We need to ensure that people are confident about their care needs and where their future care needs are best suited.

One of the problems that I had with the process last week — Ms Bradley will know this very well — is that people who are admitted to residential care facilities are admitted on the basis of individual care needs. That is where the process fell down: it moved away from the individual, and it was decided to do something en bloc. That should never have happened. We need to get back to individual care needs and to ensuring that we treat every one of our elderly people currently in residential care facilities as an individual while we look to a policy that will provide the opportunity for more people to be in their own home or in supported living, where they can have that care and support while having their individuality. If we have people in residential care homes, they should be in good-sized rooms with an en suite and in facilities that give them a degree of independence and privacy. That is not afforded to people to the same extent in many of the facilities currently. Those are good aspirations. The change has to be about dealing with people as individuals and showing them due care and respect.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Chomhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers to date. At best, this could be described as absolutely confused; at worst, absolutely chaotic. The Minister needs to bring clarity to the process as it goes forward. He has to take the opportunity that he has, to date, failed to take to state that no homes have been given any guarantee that they will not be closed. Can he do that?

Mr Poots: That is the fourth Sinn Féin Member to ask basically the same question. I have been very clear about it. The process that was initiated the week before last to close all the care homes in three trust areas has ended. We will now look at the care needs of our elderly population, at where the supported living opportunities are available and at who would be best suited to that.

Let me tell you of a situation where one elderly person was in a residential care facility, separated from their partner, who could not support them in their own home. They are now both in a supported living facility. That person moved out of a residential care home because they were able to be rejoined with their partner. We did not see their tears on television. They wanted to tell their story on television but did not get the opportunity to tell it, in spite of it

being made available. We did not hear their story on television, but that was a couple who shed many tears because of their separation, and because of a good policy they got the opportunity to be in a supported living facility where they received the care and support that they needed and were able to come together once again.

There are lots of really good options out there for older people, including the option of staying in the facility in which they are currently living. Let us discuss it with them and look at how we take things forward with them into the future.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement and assure him of my full support. Exactly how many residential care homes are likely to close, and where does the excellent Thackeray Place care home in Limavady fit into any future elderly care provision? I know that he is a very busy man, but I ask him to come down to Thackeray Place at some stage.

Mr Poots: Transforming Your Care, which, I note, all parties in the Chamber supported, recognised that just over 50% of homes would close over the next five years. I do not know which facilities will close and which will stay open. I know that, for example, there are only three residential care facilities in the Belfast Trust area. Quite a number of homes that they previously provided have closed over the years, and there was not a lot of fuss about it because it was done quite well.

As we move forward, where facilities fall short of the standards that we expect, where the numbers decline significantly in those facilities over time and where we can deal with these situations without causing distress to the elderly residents who live there, due consideration will be given to those circumstances.

I will give consideration to Mr Robinson's request to visit Thackeray Place residential home and get back to him.

Mr I McCrea: As other Members have said, the Minister visited Westlands home in Cookstown last week and saw at first hand the impact that the Northern Trust's decision had had on the residents. Will he assure the House and, indeed, the residents and staff of all homes that the way in which they were treated by the trust officials in lining them up and bringing them in one by one to tell them they had six months to find a new home —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr I McCrea: — will not happen and that he thinks that that way of treating people is absolutely ridiculous?

Mr Poots: I do not think that any trust or individual can look back on the past couple of weeks with any pride about how they dealt with elderly people. I will want to ensure that that is not the case in the future. In doing that, I will work very closely and ensure that trusts work very closely with our Commissioner for Older People to take advice and to ensure that we take all the issues into consideration. We will have oversight of any future proposals from the director of social care to ensure that we treat our elderly people with the respect, dignity, care and compassion that we all want to see.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the statement. Minister, you opened your statement by focusing primarily on the well-being and treatment of our older people. It is just a pity that the trust did not share your sentiment. Greenfield home in Strabane, as alluded to, was one of the homes on the Western Trust's hit list. Will the Minister confirm to the House what funding will be given to areas such as Strabane for the future long-term provision of elderly care, ensuring that staff are trained in dementia care and that Strabane has adequate provision to deal with capacity, which is not the case at present?

Mr Poots: I know that Sinn Féin supported Transforming Your Care, as did all the other parties. It indicated that over 50% of homes would close over the next five years. I suspect that the Member would like to see investment in Strabane in supported care housing and so forth. That would enable us to have quality facilities for our elderly people in Strabane as they start to feel a little more vulnerable and less secure in their own home and as they want the confidence that they can continue to live independently while having the support that is needed. That is a discussion that she really should have with the local trust on how we can achieve that as quickly as possible while ensuring that we cause no distress to the individuals who are currently in facilities in Strabane and right across Northern Ireland.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. The residents and friends of Slieve Roe are listening carefully to what you have to say today. Will the HSC Board now ultimately make the decision on which homes are to be closed?

Mr Poots: The HSC Board will make that decision, yes. We will do it on the basis of the care needs of individuals, what is available in the local area, how we can provide that support and how we can ensure that the quality care and the higher standard of care that we want for the elderly population in the future can be provided without causing distress to the people who are currently in care. They may be in buildings that are not as good as they should be, but they may nonetheless be very content in those buildings because of the care that they receive and because they have built up good relationships with the staff. It is a credit to those staff that, in spite of the facilities that they work in, the elderly people feel so secure in such facilities.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Overend.

Mrs Overend: Sorry, Mr Speaker, I did not realise that I was going to be called then.

I thank the Minister for his statement. I concur with the Members who referred to Mrs Faulkner, who is from Mid Ulster. She very aptly portrayed the voices of elderly people across Northern Ireland who are concerned for their future. I remember hearing on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to her question.

Mrs Overend: OK. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to ask her question.

Mrs Overend: I refer the Minister to the decision that was made last week about removing the chief executive of the Northern Trust. Will he tell the House when that decision was made and whether it related to the circumstances of last week? Will he clarify that situation, please?

Mr Poots: The decision on that issue, which is not currently under discussion, was made probably the previous week. A discussion took place with the individual, and we came to a mutual arrangement that will allow us to resolve issues in Antrim hospital, in particular, and in the Northern Trust. That is something that has taken place over a period of time. We have a turnaround team in place. When we got advice from the turnaround team, we acted on it. There was a relatively short period in which we were identifying people who would take up the roles and so forth, but that had absolutely

nothing to do with the current issues around care of the elderly.

11.15 am

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Slieve Roe House in Killeel is one of the facilities affected. It is disappointing that, on five occasions, a Minister of this House refused to answer a question. It is in the public interest that he does, because — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: It is in the public interest that he does. He has refused to do it. He gives one answer in private and another in public.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to her question.

Ms Ruane: My question is this: does the Minister agree with me that this is a very, very shoddy way of doing governance and very bad for the health service?

Mr Poots: Thankfully, I have not taken my lead from the former Minister of Education. If I did, I would really do things in a shoddy way.

For those who find basic English difficult to understand: the process of TYC continues. The party opposite agreed to and supported that process, which indicated that over 50% of residential care homes would close because we would have identified a different way of providing that care. That process continues. We are not going down the route proposed by three trusts of closing 100% of facilities, some as quickly as in six months. That is not because we want to save the facilities but because we want to save elderly people from distress. If some people want to focus on saving not-fit-for-purpose buildings, that is a matter for them. I am not interested in not-fit-for-purpose buildings; I am interested in the elderly people who we provide care for in them. I am engaged in ensuring that we do not cause any further distress than has already been the case in a number of facilities.

I will take no lectures from Ms Ruane. I opposed her when she closed the I CAN facility, which provided support for disabled children in Ballynahinch — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: When she was Minister, she did not listen to any of the cases that were made by any MLAs.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. Given the Minister's very public disappointment about the handling of the closure of the residential homes by trust officials, will he tell the House whether any of those officials will be reprimanded?

Mr Poots: We have taken control of the situation. We will ensure that the process is carried out in a way that does not cause the distress that was caused last week. I will look into how things happened, why they happened, why trusts did not see that there would be problems with going down the route that they proposed and why they thought that they could proceed without seeking to indicate to us beforehand that that was their preferred route. Over the next number of weeks and months, we need to enquire about and look into how a lot of things were handled.

Mr Durkan: From listening to the Minister today, I am not so sure that he has stopped this process as much as slowed it down. The Minister has reaffirmed his commitment to 'Transforming Your Care'. That document has been discussed in the House on several occasions, but I do not recall a vote ever having taken place.

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

Mr Durkan: Given his commitment to that document, can the Minister confirm that it is still his intention to close 50% of residential care homes and indicate how that 50% will be identified and when they will be notified and the residents consulted?

Mr Poots: The Member knows 'Transforming Your Care' very well. He sat on the Committee and understands the issues. He knows that we are going down a process of providing a different kind of care model for our elderly population. When I say "a different kind of care model", I am thinking that the House accepted that it was not only different but considerably better.

If Members want to say to me today, "Do not provide better care for the elderly because we want to keep people in substandard conditions in substandard facilities and do not want them to have the best possible care", let them stand up and say that. I will not go down that route. If other Members want to go down that route, let them table a motion and argue their case. As I

said, I do not want any member of my family to be in a residential care facility in a cramped room and sharing toilets and bathrooms with quite a number of elderly people. I want them to be in the best possible facilities. That is what I want to provide, and that is what Transforming Your Care is about. It will inevitably lead to a reduction in those kinds of facilities. We need to do that without causing the distress that was caused to elderly people last week.

We need to get back to the issue of how we bring about change for the better without causing hurt to people in the interim. That is the key, and that is where there was a failing. The failing was not in the policy; the policy is right. I am not doing a U-turn on that policy, and I will not be doing so because it will deliver better care for the elderly.

Mrs Dobson: How dare the Minister blame others when he is responsible — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, order. Allow the Member to ask her question. Order.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I visited Crozier House in Banbridge last week. One 90-year-old gentleman told me that he felt like a piece of scrap that was being thrown away. His words will live long in my memory. He asked me about his human rights. Will the Minister outline the human rights of the pensioners who are terrified that they will be removed from their homes? In Crozier House last week, they were clear about where the blame firmly lies.

Mr Poots: I did not go down to Crozier House to tell people that they were being put out of their facility. In fact, I was in Crozier House a few weeks ago and did not indicate anything of the kind. So, if distress was caused to people in Crozier House, it was not caused by me. I was there three weeks ago, and nobody complained that I had caused distress to those elderly people. Mrs Dobson might want to reconsider her comments: they are clearly inaccurate.

I was in Grove House in Ballynahinch before it closed. I knew people who were there, and they asked me to come and visit. That closure caused distress to those people. That decision was taken by Minister McGimpsey of the Ulster Unionist Party, and it caused distress to those people. I have stepped in to ensure that people's human rights are properly looked after. We need to do that on the basis of individual care needs. Block closures of a series of facilities is not the way to do that. We need to look at individual care needs and ensure that

they are best met with the consent of the individuals. That work will happen over time.

As I said, many people who are in a residential care home will see out their days in a statutory residential care home. Others may wish, for political reasons or reasons connected to their jobs — for example, those in the media or the press — to continue to scare people. If people genuinely do not want to cause distress to elderly people, they should put out the message that they are hearing today, which is that people should not be concerned or distressed about their future care and well-being because they will have a lot of control over it. We will work very closely with those elderly people to ensure that they get the best care. Those who are exploiting the elderly should be careful about how they do it.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am sure that no Member wants to exploit vulnerable people, but, at the same time, I am sure that the Minister will want to give the House an assurance that never again will those health trusts be allowed out like hound dogs to issue eviction notices to vulnerable people and staff in the disgraceful way that they did last week.

Mr Poots: I would not use the terminology that Mr Dallat used, but I stepped in last week when it was evident that, however it was done, it was causing elderly people distress. That is wrong — we cannot get away from it. That is why I said what I have said over the past number of days and took the decision to stop a process that, as enacted, was causing distress to elderly people, which I find unacceptable.

Mr Allister: On 24 April, the Northern Trust announced 100% closure, and the Minister said nothing and gave no rebuke. Indeed, on 27 April, he was quoted justifying it. It was only in the furore of the following week that the Minister reached for reverse gear. Why was that? Is it not clear from his statement today that, ultimately, he wants to maximise the closure of care homes through stealth by stopping new admissions and continuing not to invest in those homes, leaving those who cannot —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr Allister: — go to assisted living with nowhere but the private sector to go to? Where does the buck stop in the health service?

Mr Poots: Not for the first time, the Member gets it wrong. Sometimes, he knows when he

is getting it wrong but does it nonetheless to try to score a political point.

Let me be absolutely clear: every time I was interviewed, I said that what the trust was doing went beyond Transforming Your Care. I said that it was not a done deal and that I would be very surprised if all these care homes closed. Given the level of distress that was evident, I stepped in to stop the process altogether.

This was never my policy. This was never my proposal. Those who talk about U-turns need to identify a time when I supported the closure of 100% of residential care homes. No such time exists, so I suspect that those who say otherwise are engaged in shoddy politics as opposed to caring for elderly people.

I will seek to ensure that we give confidence to elderly people in residential care and to people considering going into care or getting support of some kind that their future is secure, their views are of merit, they will always be listened to and, as we develop Transforming Your Care, we will develop one of the best care systems for an elderly population anywhere in the world. If Mr Allister wishes to have people in second- or third-rate facilities as opposed to in the best facilities, he should stand up and say that instead of hedging around the issue.

Mr McNarry: The Minister said that he was not at fault and that he was unsighted on the action contemplated by some trusts. Will he tell the House who he believes is at fault? Will he tell us why those at fault deviated from the criteria and understanding of the policy that he announced today?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. When I first came into the Department, I said that I wanted to be aware of things that had the potential to cause problems before they happened. That is simply because my take on something may be different from that of whoever thought up an idea, so we may go about things differently. This was not highlighted to me, and that is an issue. The trust took a view that it wanted to move ahead very quickly with Transforming Your Care and got ahead of itself to some extent. Although the trust would have been successful in providing high-quality facilities, I do not believe that it took enough cognisance of the distress that would be caused to elderly people who are currently in facilities. Those people are satisfied with the care that they receive, and they know the other elderly people in their care facility and the staff. So the consequence was that this caused them distress because they did not understand the change that was being proposed.

I find that unacceptable, and, over the next number of weeks and months, I will seek to identify how we got to the point that we got to.

11.30 am

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to ask the Minister to add a bit more clarity to this issue. The Committee for Social Development raised the matter of supported housing, which the Minister referred to. The Department for Social Development (DSD) has cut back the special needs management allowance (SNMA) to a number of facilities, and I believe that this recent controversy has led to even more confusion for some of the people who are involved in some of the facilities that provide accommodation for people under supported needs grant aid. Can the Minister assure the House that, as we go forward, the Health Department and DSD will have a joined-up approach to how they manage this process in the time ahead?

Mr Poots: The Member raises a very valid question. It is absolutely essential that DSD and the Health Department work closely together on these issues. DSD provides some excellent supported living facilities, particularly for people who have learning disabilities and mental health needs.

As Departments, we need to work very closely on housing needs for all our vulnerable citizens and ensure that vulnerable citizens receive that high-quality facility home to live in and that degree of independence that allows them to live with a degree of dignity and respect. We need to ensure that that is done in such a way that they can receive all the support that they need from the medical perspective at all times. It is very important that we work closely together to deliver all that, and I thank the Member for the question.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. There are some indications that many trusts have been operating what is essentially a no-new-admissions policy for over a year. Can the Minister advise what steps he has taken, with other Ministers, to provide additional supported housing? How many such units are in place, how many are planned and where are they?

Mr Poots: The issue of non-admittance goes back considerably further than a year. That has been the case for quite a while, and, indeed, Ms Bradley was very well aware of it while she worked in that sector before becoming an MLA.

There are a considerable number of supported housing facilities, and there will be a considerable number more. That is the course of work that we are going down, and that is the route that we are going down. We can give the Member a list or make it available in the Assembly Library of where these facilities are. Perhaps that will assist Members in their constituency in being able to point in the right direction elderly people who require good care needs and who are considering their future.

Executive Committee Business

Forestry (Felling of Trees) (Calculation of the Area of Land) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That the draft Forestry (Felling of Trees) (Calculation of the Area of Land) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I seek to introduce the aforementioned statutory rule, which, subject to the Assembly's approval, will define the boundaries to be used for calculating an area of woodland to determine if it is 0.2 hectares or more and, therefore, subject to felling licensing legislation. Before I go into the detail of these regulations, I will explain briefly to Members the background and the context.

The Forestry Act was passed by this Assembly in 2010, following extensive interest and debate during the legislative passage of the Forestry Bill. The Act contains a power, at section 15, to license the felling of trees growing on land of 0.2 hectares or more. This will support my Department's general duty to promote afforestation and sustainable forestry in line with the forestry policy. The same section requires my Department to provide for the calculation of the area of such land in regulations and by affirmative resolution; hence, the reason for the regulations before you today.

The actual licensing of felling is covered in parallel legislation — the Forestry (Felling of Trees) Regulations 2013. Those regulations are not subject to affirmative resolution and are, therefore, not before you today. They have received SL1 approval from the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and await being made simultaneously with the forestry regulations today.

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

Today's debate is purely about the forestry regulations, which prescribe boundaries to be used for the calculation of the area of woodland encompassed for felling-licence consideration. The ultimate purpose of the regulations concerns the calculation of an area of woodland, and how boundaries are to be determined for that purpose.

The regulations recognise that a woodland area may or may not be contained within a physical boundary such as a wall, fence, ditch or river. In the first instance, if such a physical boundary surrounds a woodland or forest, it must be used as a reference for any subsequent calculation of the area of the enclosed woodland.

Alternatively, where no such physical boundary exists, the boundary will be taken as the outside of the crowns of the perimeter trees that join canopy, or have the reasonable potential to join canopy, on the land. The boundaries set down in the regulations are the basis for any measurement of the woodland area to determine whether it is 0.2 hectares or more and subject to a felling licence. The legislation does not regulate any specific measurement or calculation methods that must subsequently be used.

My Department consulted comprehensively on the regulations along with the Forestry (Felling of Trees) Regulations 2013. The regulations in front of you were developed following several meetings with stakeholder groups and three presentations to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. Most recently, in December 2012, the regulations were positively received by stakeholders before final consideration by the Committee. That built on a 12-week public consultation exercise undertaken in 2011 that included woodland owners and the timber industry, the Ulster Farmers' Union, and environmental agencies and bodies. Constructive responses were received from 14 representative stakeholder groups. Those responses informed a process of revision so that the regulations before you today are clear, workable and fit for purpose. In particular, stakeholders highlighted the importance of simple, supporting guidance, and we have responded to that.

In consultation with stakeholders, my Department has produced user-friendly guidelines, which will be available online and in hard copy to assist in the implementation of the new felling-licence system, including those aspects of the regulations before you today. In addition, my Department discussed with stakeholders the importance of workable timelines for processing felling applications, and we have committed to setting those out in a customer standards charter.

I strongly reiterate my gratitude for the valuable contributions of our stakeholders and the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee in the regulations' development. I am pleased to say that, when it considered the regulations on 23 April, the Committee indicated that it was content for the regulations to be brought to the

Assembly for debate. I am grateful to the Chair and the members of the Committee for their support of the regulations. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the motion. It seeks to affirm the Forestry (Felling of Trees) (Calculation of the Area of Land) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013. The regulations will define the boundaries to be used in calculating whether an area of woodland is 0.2 hectares or more. All woodland of 0.2 hectares or more will be subject to a felling licence, unless an exemption applies. The regulations will complement the Forestry (Felling of Trees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013.

Regulations on felling licences will come by negative resolution. The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development considered those in conjunction with the regulation on the calculation of land. It had a few issues with felling licences, and clarification has been sought. However, the Committee is content that, although the statutory rule is almost a suite of regulations, the issues to do with the felling licence need not hold up the regulations on the calculation of land. The Committee therefore considered this proposal as an SL1 on 9 April 2013 and indicated that it was content with its merits. The Committee further considered the statutory rule on 23 April 2013 and resolved that it be affirmed.

I confirm that the Committee is content that the statutory rule be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mrs Dobson: I wish to make a number of short remarks about the regulations. From the outset, I welcome the fact that a balance was struck in the Forestry Act 2010 that the felling controls would apply only to areas of 0.2 hectares or more, or, for a clear perspective, in the region of half an acre.

I assume that most storms resulting in occasional windblown trees will still come in below the area specified in today's regulations. Given their unavoidable nature, it would be wrong to penalise landowners every time that one of their trees was blown over. Although my party broadly agreed with the changes made to tree felling in the Forestry Act and the subsequent regulations, any new restrictions or, in today's case, a new layer of bureaucracy, will only ever work if there is appropriate knowledge and buy-in from the industry. For instance, I know that the Minister's officials said that they hoped that the timescale from application to

granting the felling licence will be approximately three months. That is important because, although trees may not be just as pressing as animals, I remind the Minister that it will still be extremely frustrating for many landowners who have to wait months on end to get approval from the Department or even know what species they should plant. Obviously, any delays will have an economic impact. I ask the Minister to detail instances in which she would envisage an application taking longer than three months.

I welcome the regulations. The responsibility now lies with the Department to ensure that they are implemented as efficiently as possible.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Chair of the Committee and Mrs Dobson for their comments. It was a long process, and I know that the Committee sought a lot of assurances about moving forward.

I thank everyone for their support today. We are now moving forward with the legislation. I will make sure that we get the guidance published and get it out there as quickly as possible. I assure Mrs Dobson that there is no intention to delay any process. All applications will be processed in as timely a manner as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Forestry (Felling of Trees) (Calculation of the Area of Land) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Primary Schools: Inner South Belfast

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

Mr Spratt: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the need to address underachievement in Protestant working-class areas; acknowledges the vital role of primary school in a child's early education; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward plans for a new primary school for inner south Belfast as a matter of urgency.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on this important subject. I thank the Minister for being in the House to hear and respond to today's debate.

Educational underachievement affects not only south Belfast but many other areas too. However, statistics show that underachievement is more prevalent in the controlled sector, and I will come back to that later. It has been proven that the early years of a child's education are the most formative and, if we are to seriously tackle underachievement, we must examine all the systemic issues that cause it in the first place.

One of the key influences in academic performance is socio-economic background and, with that, there are a number of other factors, such as parental qualifications and the home learning environment. It is interesting to note that in family situations where the mother has a higher standard of education, the children have a better chance of success at school. Parental involvement in their children's education is very important as it helps to build aspirations for the children to work towards.

A number of other factors impact on a child's development, including attendance at school. There are issues around literacy in young males, and there is a perception among young men that literacy skills, such as reading, poetry,

etc, are for girls only. There is also a lack of role models for young men.

When Dr Pete Shirlow presented to the Education Committee in 2011, he said:

"A total of 75% of lower than expected schools were in the controlled sector, and most of those were clustered in Belfast. In each of those schools, 50-plus pupils were eligible for free school meals, which is a high sign of social deprivation, and one in five — 20% — were identified as having special educational needs."

That clearly demonstrates that underachievement is a particular problem in Protestant areas. That is why we accept the amendment to today's motion. It was never intended to underestimate other areas of deprivation, so we will not divide the House on it.

11.45 am

Pete Shirlow goes into further detail, stating:

"pupils who receive free school meals in Catholic secondary schools are twice as likely to go to university than pupils who receive free school meals in Protestant secondary schools."

He presented more figures regarding Key Stage 2 maths and English, which, again, showed a clear differential between the maintained and controlled sectors. The same applied to Key Stage 3 English. Further down the line at A level, there is an even larger gap, where around 33% of pupils in maintained non-grammar schools obtained two A levels compared with 17% of students in Protestant secondary schools. Those are shocking statistics, and they cannot be ignored.

Primary-school education is so important, as it provides children with numeracy and literacy skills that will stay with them all their lives. It also gives children a chance to build confidence and become more socialised. However, it is important that parents play a role in their children's education. Just by taking an interest, it shows that the child's education is worthwhile.

To take a step back, for those children who do not have that, I commend the excellent work carried out by the Sure Start programmes. Without those valuable programmes, many children would not have the encouragement and attention that they need in order to succeed.

Special needs provision is also very important in tackling underachievement. In each of the three schools in inner south Belfast, the number of children with special educational needs is alarmingly high: in Donegall Road Primary School, it is 24%; in Fane Street Primary School, it is 42%; and in Blythefield Primary School, it is 51%. Those figures were obtained from Sandy Row Community Forum's Revitalise Education report, which consulted the local community on the way forward for education in the area. If schools and communities worked together and built a stronger connection, it would be of enormous benefit to everyone in the community.

I will turn now to the subject of the new primary school for inner south Belfast, which has been debated for some time. The Revitalise Education report makes note of the perception that all three primary schools would require capital investment and are not visually modern. It acknowledges that a fancy building does not make the school but does send out a positive message to parents and children.

As Members will be aware, the Village area is undergoing major and vast regeneration. Old houses are being replaced with new, and the whole area will be transformed when that is complete. It would not make sense to have three old primary schools in a modernised area. Local children should be able to access primary education in 21st century facilities, with up-to-date technology and resources. The Minister alluded to that when he responded to the Adjournment debate on this very subject in December 2011. He stated:

"I accept the argument that when a community and young people see investment being made in them through new infrastructure and new buildings, it is reflected in the outcomes of those young people's education." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 69, p348, col 1].

I remember raising that issue with the previous Minister of Education, and I think that it is highly regrettable that progress on the subject has been so slow.

A site was identified at Belfast City Hospital, which received support from the local community. It would make sense to locate a new primary school roughly halfway between the primary schools at Blythefield and the Donegall Road. However, considerable time has passed since the site at the hospital was identified. Given that the project has not progressed, I understand that the Belfast Trust may require the site for health purposes. That

rumour has been going about for a considerable time. However, my colleague Edwin Poots assured me in recent conversations that neither the trust nor the Department of Health has ruled out the potential to use that site for a school and that the ongoing feasibility study is being facilitated by the health estates and the trust.

A full planning application was submitted on 26 September 2012. That requires approval. If the Department of Education and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) then approve an economic appraisal and make funding available, the site could be acquired and the project proceed to the next stage.

I understand from previous questions to the Minister that he stated that it was the board's responsibility to progress that project. However, given the time that has elapsed and the number of educational opportunities already missed, I call on the Minister of Education to take a personal interest in this new school project and work with ministerial colleagues in the Executive to ensure that it is expedited as quickly as possible.

We will accept the amendment. I reiterate that it was never the intention to disqualify other areas. It was merely about the time that this has taken and the fact that the regeneration of the Village area is now ongoing. Perhaps the Minister will also look at the amount of money that is being spent on remedial work in all three schools by the Belfast Board to try to keep them up to some sort of standard. I believe that a major spend is still ongoing in those areas.

Mr Hazzard: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "address" and insert

"educational underachievement in all working-class communities; acknowledges the vital role of primary school in a child's education; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Belfast Education and Library Board to bring forward plans for a new primary school for inner south Belfast as a matter of urgency."

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion as amended. Despite agreeing with much of what the previous speaker said, it is important not to assign educational underachievement to one part of our community or another. Undoubtedly, it is important to tackle educational underachievement in Protestant working-class areas, but it is just as important to tackle it in

Catholic working-class areas and in any areas of social deprivation where underachievement exists.

Educational underachievement is a socio-economic issue. It is definitely not a religious issue. Whatever way you dissect the statistics and classify the problem, be it numerically, by gender or community background, there is only one common denominator, which is that the problem of educational underachievement is more prevalent in our socially disadvantaged communities. It is the same throughout the world: social disadvantage breeds educational underachievement. It is not unique to the North of Ireland or, indeed, to parts of south or east Belfast.

In the aftermath of the recent street violence in Belfast, the First Minister, Peter Robinson, said that statistics prove that underachievement is worst among Protestant working-class boys. That is not the case. The latest figures show that 450 Protestant boys entitled to free school meals did not achieve the benchmark of five GCSEs, while 888 Catholic boys entitled to free school meals did not achieve five GCSEs covering the same period. Those are the facts of the matter.

So, there is a need to tackle educational underachievement wherever it exists, be that for Protestants, Catholics or those with no religion. We must not apply sectarian rhetoric to the situation and get mixed up in a process of demanding funding for this or that community. I am happy that that has not happened today.

Wherever there is social disadvantage in educational underachievement, let us work together to eradicate it, regardless of the colour of the uniform, colour of the skin or what church they do or do not go to. I welcome the fact that unionist representatives are taking educational underachievement very seriously. If they are genuine in wanting to tackle underachievement, Sinn Féin is more than happy to work with them to do so. However, many of the unionist politicians calling for action here today criticised Sinn Féin Education Ministers for prioritising social disadvantage criteria in determining the use of education resources. They are the same politicians who opposed the ending of academic selection despite the fact that all the evidence is that the biggest losers in a selective system are those from a socially disadvantaged background.

For too long, we have had to endure the nonsense that grammar schools provide the working class with a route out of poverty. This is simply not the case. In fact, 80% of grammar

school places go to children of parents in professional occupations compared with just 20% in manual occupations. Only 8% of grammar school places go to children in the bottom two categories of the Registrar General's scale, and the figure is closer to 1% or 2% in various socially deprived areas across the North. These children simply do not have the same advantage as others when it comes to sitting the unregulated exams, be it because of lack of access to the additional tutoring required or even a lack of the basic family support that many of us take for granted. Moreover, for a large number of young people in socially deprived areas, there can be a multiplicity of pressures in the household that affect their ability to pass the kind of selection test that some schools now practise.

Rather than giving these children additional support, some Ulster Unionist and DUP representatives would prefer to endorse a system that tells them, at the age of 10 or 11, that they are failures. They then wonder why these kids lose faith in education and any sense of hope or aspiration. We need a change of mind when it comes to this topic. Political unionism needs to progress quickly from pandering to the prejudices of those who regard a grammar school place as a positional good that somehow defines their superior place in society. We need to get on with representing all of the interests of the children and young people who are too often left behind.

Surely, it is time that we acknowledge that the worst start that any child can have in life is to be branded a failure. Surely, it is time that we acknowledge that mixed-ability environments enable all children to flourish and become all that they can be.

It is important to stress that ending academic selection does not mean ending academic excellence. We are in favour of educational excellence for all children, and all the evidence proves that a mixed-ability system is the best way to achieve this because it raises everyone. It challenges, incentivises, and drives all kids to be the best that they can be.

Speaking of the need to tackle the inequalities of British life in the post-war years, Ernest Bevin remarked that the worst poverty of all was the poverty of aspiration. For too long, the educational segregation of our young people has perpetrated a poverty of aspiration among many in disadvantaged communities, such as inner south Belfast. For too long, those opposite have ignored the demands for an equitable response to the problem. Hopefully, today we will start to see a change of direction

and an opening up of the space in which to have a sensible debate.

Abolishing academic selection in all its guises is at the core of building any equitable, world-class education system. However, a wide range of policies is also required to address underachievement in working-class areas. I think that the steady increase in attainment during Sinn Féin's time with the Education Ministry shows that we have the right policies in place, but the pace of change needs to be quickened. In 2006, the number of school leavers achieving the recognised benchmark of five good GCSEs was 52%. By 2011, it was 59%, and it increased again to more than 60% in 2012.

In recent years, successive Education Ministers have initiated a broad range of reforms, with an emphasis on ensuring that all young people leave school with the skills and training required to meet the employment demands of a rapidly changing world. For too long, education provision was planned in an unco-ordinated and bottom-up way, through which the market demands of individual institutions triumphed over the educational needs of the pupil and the community. Thankfully, we now see the building blocks of a system that delivers quality learning while guaranteeing an equitable and more relevant curriculum choice.

Central to this evolution in education provision have been the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework, which, in tandem, have developed key skills, increased access and choice for all pupils, and empowered young people to make informed decisions about their future.

Now, academic courses can be integrated with challenging professional and technical courses. These provide a much better base for many future third-level entrants. Increasingly, courses are focused on the requirements of a globalised economy. Moreover, the entitlement framework ensures the capacity to deliver high-quality professional and technical pathways, again accessed by choice and available through modern organisational flexibility. Above all, it ensures that all our young people enjoy parity of esteem.

However, there are still communities and families throughout the North, including various parts of south Belfast, who no longer feel connected to education. We need to find ways of reconnecting them and encouraging people to, once again, value the tremendous gift that is education. The education awareness campaign that the Minister launched recently aims to do just that: reminding parents and families that

education does not start and stop at the school gates and that we should all engage with our children and their learning process as often as we can, be that as simple as a bedtime story or helping them with particular aspects of their learning.

For some, that type of engagement may seem obvious, but, for a variety of reasons, many within socially disadvantaged communities are detached from their children's learning process. It is vital that we break the cycle and offer the type of support that the Minister has outlined. We also need to continue to prioritise resources where they are needed most, and I hope that the other parties will now begin to support us in that process.

12.00 noon

Recently, the Executive announced plans to create 200-plus teaching posts for newly graduated teachers, with particular focus on raising standards and achievement. That will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the socially disadvantaged areas that we have talked about today and which really need that type of investment.

At the heart of this issue is the clear necessity to continue the process of change within education, but we must stop the pandering to a small but influential section of vested interests that has set itself against change in order to protect its own privileged position.

On the specifics of a primary school for inner south Belfast, I am not across every facet of local detail, as some from the area might be. However, given that two of the wards in inner south Belfast, Blackstaff and Shaftesbury, are in the North's top 10% of deprived areas, that child poverty is treble the North's average and, ultimately, that educational attainment is nowhere near the level it should be, it is fair to suggest that all of us need to do a lot more to tackle the outstanding issues. If a new primary school is what local people and the education authorities feel is the best way forward, I am sure that the area planning process may be able to facilitate such a proposal. No doubt the Minister will speak to those points in greater detail later in the debate.

All those who consider themselves to be the political representatives of south Belfast need to step up to the plate and play their role in raising educational awareness and aspirations within that community. That is for every party in the House to take cognisance of.

The educational framework for addressing underachievement is, to a large extent, in place. It includes the school improvement policy, the literacy and numeracy strategy, the revised curriculum, the entitlement framework and the continued promotion of such targeted programmes as Sure Start, amongst many others. However, we need to see a renewed discussion in areas such as south Belfast on the long-term, devastating effects of academic selection and rejection at age 10 and 11.

I call on Members to support any and all attempts to tackle underachievement in all our local communities. Sinn Féin will work with anybody who seeks to improve the educational outcomes of our children.

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

Mr Hazzard: We invite any community to engage with us. I call on Members to support the amended motion.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Members who brought this motion to the Floor. Getting education right, and getting an education system that works for all our most vulnerable children, is one of the biggest challenges facing us today. It is not only about the need. There is a profound responsibility on each and every one of us in the Assembly to address educational underachievement wherever it is found, be it in Belfast or across Northern Ireland.

In my opinion, every child, regardless of their community background, deserves the right to a good education. We owe it to our children to ensure that every one of them can read, write and count well before they leave school at 16. It is something of a scandal that all of them are not able to do that in this day and age.

There is no doubt that there is educational underachievement in Protestant working-class areas, but we must accept that educational underachievement is not a reality in just one community. There is educational underachievement in many nationalist areas as well. It is important that we do not forget those facts.

Even though we have spent the past 20 years trying to put conflict behind us, the residue of the conflict, across Belfast and beyond, has left us with a legacy. The malign grip of paramilitary groups and former paramilitary groups is still strangling far too many of our communities. That malign grip undermines the

potential for educational achievement. It makes it much more difficult to run a successful primary school in any neighbourhood that is being strangled.

I have had the privilege and, indeed, the pleasure of working with a number of principals and teaching and support staff in many of our primary schools across my constituency and far beyond. A number of them work in particularly challenging environments. We owe it to them to reduce the barriers and obstacles to their success. Their environments are challenging because some of them operate in schools that are crumbling and in urgent need of refurbishment or, in many cases, a newbuild. Some work with children who, through no fault of their own, come from a difficult background and require particular levels of extra support and attention. I am always amazed by the dedication that those principals and their staff show in going beyond the duties of just being teachers.

The motion is right to point out the important role of primary school in a child's early education. Early years and even preschool are critical points in helping to give children the best possible start in life. There has been much talk of a new amalgamated primary school in inner south Belfast, to which the motion refers, for several years now. Unfortunately, there has been very little or no movement. Teachers and pupils struggle to cope with difficult conditions in the existing primary schools. For the schools on Blythe Street and on the Donegall Road, the building fabric is very difficult. For Fane Street, although the building fabric is good, many parents feel that the school is not in the best possible location. It is clear that there is a crying need for a newbuild primary school that amalgamates all three primary schools. We reiterate our calls to the Minister to take action on the issue as soon as is humanly possible.

As a representative of South Belfast and, indeed, as a resident, my constituency's needs are always uppermost in my mind. However, when it comes to educational underachievement, which I feel very passionate about, it is an issue for much more than one constituency.

I have long argued for the need for a special education task force to be set up that would tackle, in a deep and detailed way, educational underachievement where it is most acute. I believe that I am failing in my job — indeed, we are all failing in our job — if we allow a single child to go through seven years of schooling only to then leave at 16 years of age unable to

read and write adequately. We heard shocking statistics from colleagues earlier.

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

Dr McDonnell: I hope that the Minister will respond positively to the motion and demand that officials urgently set the wheels in motion to build a new primary school in inner south Belfast. Furthermore, I hope that the Minister will consider the proposal to set up a special educational task force to help to address what is one of the greatest social injustices in our society today.

Mr McGimpsey: I begin by saying that I welcome the debate, support the motion and have no issues with the amendment. We have been on this project for many years. Indeed, getting the communities in the area to agree that we close three primary schools and amalgamate them into one has taken quite an effort, not only on my part but that of a number of representatives. I must pay tribute to Bob Stoker, a councillor in the Village, for the efforts that he has put in.

The history is quite simple: none of the three primary schools' buildings is fit for purpose, and they need to be amalgamated. Fane Street Primary School is so old that it is now a listed building. The building at Sandy Row's Blythefield Primary School is long past its sell-by date. So, too, is that at Donegall Road Primary School.

We have agreement. One of the key parts of that agreement was the hospital site. When I was Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I was able to confirm that the site was not crucial to the development of the hospital or the trust. As far as the community is concerned, that is the site that we have earmarked, together with the Belfast Board. As I said, that has taken a long time to come forward.

In response to what Mr Jimmy Spratt said, I say that the Health Minister, Edwin Poots, stated in a letter to me, dated no later than 15 March:

"neither the Trust nor the DHSSPS have ruled out the potential to use the site for a school."

He said that, although he could certainly see merit in a proposed new school for the area, he had been advised that officials from his Department had not had any formal indication from the Department of Education that it wished

to progress the scheme. That is a serious matter for the Minister to address.

Mr Spratt: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: I am happy to give way, yes.

Mr Spratt: This has been going on for some considerable time now; in fact, it was going on during your time as Health Minister. Will you, therefore, enlighten the House by saying what you did about it during that period and why you did not progress the issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGimpsey: As Mr Spratt will be aware, the scheme's progression is a matter for the board and the Department. The issue was that the board wished to go forward with the scheme, but to do so, it needed approval from the Department and Mr O'Dowd's predecessor to spend, as I recall, £16,000 on planning consultants. That approval could not be got from the Department until Mr O'Dowd came in, and that is where it is.

The site is actually zoned in the area plan for non-hospital use. I very much welcome Edwin Poots's letter, because I think that it gives us a lot of comfort. Where we are now is that the board has put in a planning application, and I have no doubt that that will be approved come the summer. We will then have an economic appraisal, after which, there will be a decision.

I am looking for that assurance, bearing in mind what Mr Spratt, Alasdair McDonnell and, indeed, Mr Hazzard said about educational disadvantage, although Mr Hazzard seemed to lose us a wee bit in a long, carefully prepared speech about other issues. Regardless of whether we have a grammar school, and regardless of whether we have the 11-plus, we need to have a primary school in that area. The arguments are overwhelming. Those are seriously disadvantaged communities, and children there are working in the worst conditions. This is an opportunity for the Sinn Féin Minister to step in a way that his predecessor refused to and give us an assurance that this primary school will go forward.

We appear to have, again, compliance or support from the Health Minister and his Department, and the board wants and has applied for this. It is now down to the Department of Education, and I look forward to it bringing this forward. As Alasdair McDonnell

said, there is no bigger thing that you can do for your children than provide them with an education.

The numbers of educationally disadvantaged in that area are huge, and that shames us all. As Mr Hazzard said, we all need to step up to the plate on this, although some of us did so a long time ago. Indeed, Margaret Ritchie, I and others agreed the £100 million redevelopment of the Village, which had the worst concentration of unfit housing anywhere in Northern Ireland, and a key part of that was investment in children's education and, not least, in this primary school.

We have confirmation of the availability of the hospital site. We now require confirmation that the Department is behind the board and that, when the planning permission and the economic appraisal, which I have no doubt will be positive, come through, that will allow us to go forward and provide a simple equality. Sinn Féin is fond of talking about equality and disadvantage in working-class Protestant areas. Here is their opportunity to put their money where the mouth is and to step up to the plate.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion and the amendment. We would have been happy to support the motion without the amendment, but the amendment gives a fuller description of the problem and recognises the common problem in Catholic and Protestant working-class areas, so we are happy to support it.

Both the motion and the amendment point out the widely acknowledged view that deficiencies in early years continue to affect children right through to secondary level and beyond. Indeed, I was thinking about an example from a couple of years ago when the Education Committee visited Wrightbus in Ballymena. It had set up a programme to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of its immigrant workers, but it was discovered that most of the positions on the programme had been taken up by local workers.

Again, over the past six years, in the Committee, the problem of underachievement among Protestant boys, rather than girls, has been constantly referred to. As Mr Hazzard pointed out, the statistics point to a problem across the board, and they always have done. It is a fact that, at the moment, only 32% of disadvantaged pupils achieve five GCSEs at A* to C.

There is a Programme for Government target of around 50%, but it stands at 32% now.

Mr Hazzard managed to deflect the debate briefly into the area of academic selection. I do not want to go there, but a question worth asking is this: given the geography of these three schools, how many of the pupils end up at Methody or Inst? I do not know the figure; maybe somebody else does.

12.15 pm

Dr McDonnell: Very few.

Mr Lunn: Well, I knew that.

In moving the motion, Mr Spratt mentioned the perception that literacy and numeracy is just for the girls. That takes you back to the old notion that Protestant boys did not need education because they were going to get a job in the shipyard, at Mackies, at the ropeworks or with some other major industrialist, all of which have now gone. The days of using that excuse are long gone, frankly. It is a couple of generations old now, so we can probably forget about it.

Other Members referred to socio-economic background. However, it is a fact that some schools in deprived areas do very well and some do not, so there may be more to it than that. The parental factor and the home learning environment have also been mentioned. The Committee has been told that, in an ideal scenario, 70% or 80% of all learning is achieved through the home. I have a problem with that statistic, but I do not doubt that it is extremely significant. There is also a lack of male role models, including fathers and perhaps male teachers, as there is a very low percentage of male teachers in primary schools. A school's ethos, truancy rates and the quality of its facilities, which I will come on to when I talk about the new school, are also important.

The Minister has indicated his willingness to look favourably at a development proposal, and there has been a long campaign to amalgamate these schools on one new site. As he told us again today, Mr McGimpsey indicated in 2010 that there was land on the City Hospital site that was surplus to requirements. An economic appraisal has been commissioned and a planning application has been submitted, but surely the issue of the site is, strictly speaking, something for the Health Minister rather than the Minister of Education? I do not see what the Minister of Education can do about this until the site has been clearly identified and becomes available.

It is a fact that we have three schools that are close together, are over 100 years old and are not fit for purpose. We have 450 pupils — as Mr Spratt said, a high percentage of them have special needs — being taught in substandard conditions. We appear to have ground available in the locality and a Minister who is favourably disposed. I know that money is tight, but I cannot believe that, had the conditions been right, a new school for inner south Belfast would not have been on the list of newbuilds at some stage in the immediate past or immediate future, because it is such a deserving case. The benefits of it —

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

Mr Lunn: The House has heard me, before now, talking about the nonsense of spending money for maintenance in schools that will be closed. I could go on, but I absolutely support the amended motion today.

I apologise for the absence of Anna Lo, who wanted to speak to the motion. She has been called away.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Educational underachievement affects every sector of our communities, and I commend the proposer of the motion for acknowledging that in his opening remarks. One thing we all agree on is that more needs to be done to tackle educational underachievement.

It is widely acknowledged that Dawn Purvis's report highlighted underachievement in disadvantaged areas, mainly Protestant areas. That report highlighted the issues that affect educational underachievement, particularly of Protestant boys. We need to take the necessary steps to make the changes needed to tackle underachievement, so that our young people, irrespective of their background — be it Protestant, Catholic, all faiths and none — receive the education that they are entitled to.

Our amendment to the motion aims to address underachievement in all working-class areas. There are multiple deprivation wards across the North, and socio-economic background is a key predictor of academic underachievement. High levels of absenteeism and the parental and home environment are some of the issues that have to be addressed. We need to give more support to families and communities to get involved in shaping educational outcomes for our children. There is much recognised international evidence that shows that high-

quality early years education has significant and lasting benefits for children, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Department needs to provide better support to schools in disadvantaged areas that have good, effective leadership and have already moved ahead with the support of the community to identify trans-generational educational issues in their communities, which has thrown open the doors to parents to work alongside their child, learning together. Some of those parents had bad educational experiences that were never addressed and were left to fester and be passed on to their child or children. The family and schools together (FAST) programme that some of our schools are involved in is a perfect opportunity for schools and communities to work together. Every school should be supported in having a FAST programme. I believe that the programme is run through school budgets. The Department needs to support financially the schools that run those programmes. I am delighted that one of those schools — Barrack Street — is in my area. The learning and bonding that a parent and child get during the programme, which instils confidence in parents and brings joy to children when they see their parent engaging with them in their school environment, is immeasurable.

There are problems in the link between poor educational qualifications and poverty. As was said, family structures change. The lack of role models, particularly male role models, in families is a fundamental problem that the Purvis report highlighted. The conflict has had an impact on both communities and is now having an impact on education. There are high levels of unemployment and family breakdown.

As adults, we have informed our children that their schooldays are the best days of their life. Members outlined significant gaps in achievement, particularly in grammar and non-grammar schools. There is a plethora of information and data that shows significant differences and how, in deprived communities, one community is faring less well in educational terms. I commend the work that the Minister and his Department are doing to close that gap, but we have opportunities now, with post-primary area planning, to put in place much-needed new schools in areas such as south Belfast.

I call on Members to support the amended motion.

Mr McDevitt: It gives me great pleasure to support the motion and the amendment. As

colleagues from South Belfast have rightly said in the debate, there is a long-running saga around the provision of primary school education in the Village and Donegall Road areas of south Belfast. It is a complicated situation. I do not think that any of us who represent the area would want to make it any worse by saying something that could be taken out of context.

The situation requires leadership from the Minister and the board. It requires a great deal of investment in community relations in the inner south Belfast community, which could unlock massive opportunities for the children of that part of our constituency and our city. Mr Hazzard, I think, observed that, in and around the Village and the Donegall Road and Donegall Pass areas, there are many of Northern Ireland's finest schools. It is a simple fact, as, I think, Mr Lunn stated, that very few of the children who grow up in those communities will have access to those very fine schools. Although there are complicated policy challenges that we could debate about access and barriers — we probably have debated them at great length in the House — the simple fact remains that we should be agreed that there should be no barriers in their primary education or in the quality, culture and nurturing environment of their primary education and school setting that would prevent them being potential candidates for those schools. Yet, the reality today is that there probably are more barriers than there should be. In my opinion, it is just a fact that children who attend the three schools in question do not get the same access or opportunities as those attending other schools in this jurisdiction.

We heard in the debate that there is a potential site that, as far as I am aware, enjoys the support of all parties represented in the constituency. The location of the site would be fantastic, and it would give the opportunity for a new school, a new start and a very positive new beginning. I would love to see any outstanding issues with the site resolved so that this becomes simply an educational decision, with no extraneous factors, agencies or bodies able to slow the progress of the development.

Alasdair McDonnell talked about the need to address educational underachievement, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. It is also about understanding that, in our most deprived communities, it is not just about what happens from the moment the bell goes at 9.00 am until it goes again at 2.00 pm or 3.00 pm; it is about the community of learning, the building that is the school and how it can be better utilised, and it is about breakfast clubs. It is also about

programmes that give parents who may think that they have little stake in their children's education a genuine stake in it and allowing them to feel part of that educational process. This new school, I think, would create such an environment. In fact, I know that it would because all the other new schools in south Belfast have done so.

We are spending millions regenerating the Village. When it is complete, we will hold it up to the world as a case study in urban regeneration. We should make the same investment in its future and its children, and, therefore, I am happy to support the motion and amendment.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter. I will focus my remarks on the educational underachievement aspect of the motion because, as we heard earlier, no one in the Chamber can talk more convincingly about the real need for a new primary school in inner south Belfast than my colleague Michael McGimpsey.

The Ulster Unionist Party has long called for underachievement to be addressed across all demographics. That is why we have no difficulty in supporting the motion and the amendment. There is, however, a particular problem with Protestant working-class areas, and, therefore, I welcome the motion's focus on that.

No one can determine into which social, cultural or intellectual group they will be born. Yet, disturbingly, in Northern Ireland, the postcode lottery often has a significant impact on overall educational and life achievements. As we heard, young people born into more economically deprived households are significantly less likely to attain the expected level of qualifications. This should no longer be tolerated in the 21st century. Although these debates are all fine and well when it comes to raising the profile of the problems, unless significant steps are taken following them, no one in the Chamber should be so naive as to believe that these 90 minutes will have achieved anything.

12.30 pm

Minister, I am sure you will agree that the current situation is abhorrent. That is why we need answers today about what you are doing to tackle it. At the very least, surely even you must recognise the pressing need for a new school in inner south Belfast, so do the right thing and sort it out. The problems facing our

education system are huge, but they can be overcome. It would be unthinkable for future generations in Northern Ireland if we in this generation refused to rise to meet the challenge.

No issue has such a long-term, detrimental impact as the fact that far too many young people are not reaching basic standards of literacy and numeracy. The recent Audit Office report found that 9,000 of our young people left education in 2010-11 having failed to meet the required standards. Once again, it identified a strong correlation between underachievement and entitlement to free school meals. The same problem was identified in its 2006 report. I have to ask, "Have the past six years of devolution had any impact on the issue whatsoever?". The Minister may claim that the strategy to tackle literacy and numeracy is having an impact, but it is happening far too slowly.

New ideas are needed, and I will use the debate to call once again for an initiative that my party has long been in support of and which we are pleased to see included as a specific recommendation in the recent Salisbury report — the introduction of a pupil bonus scheme. A pupil bonus scheme similar to the pupil premium in place in England would see schools receive additional money principally on the basis of how many of their children qualified for free school meals. The additional funding, available to all primary schools with one or more free school meals recipients, could then be left at the discretion of the individual principals to spend. After all, they know better than anyone the problems facing their area. Why can the Department not, for once, allow them to do what they know to be right?

Tackling the chronic education inequalities across Northern Ireland will not be easy. I support the motion. I hope that inner south Belfast is given a new primary school and trust that the Minister accepts that, by sticking rigidly to his current course, he is only prolonging the problem rather than rising to the challenge of addressing it once and for all.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business will then be Question Time. The debate will continue at 4.00 pm, when the Minister will respond.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Questions 14 and 15 have been withdrawn.

Social Investment Fund

1. **Mr Spratt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the social investment fund. (AQO 3939/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Since October 2012, our officials have been working alongside steering groups to ensure that communities across all nine social investment zones are engaged in the process to identify objective needs and potential projects to tackle those needs. Steering groups have submitted final area plans encompassing prioritised projects aimed at addressing the key objectives of the fund. The final plans were received on 28 February and are now subject to a quality assurance review, including the completion of the economic appraisal process for each proposed project. That process is assessing the individual projects in the plans against set criteria to ensure that the most robust projects are recommended to maximise impact on the ground. Following the appraisal process, we will make decisions on the final projects to be funded and the most appropriate delivery mechanism, with a view to projects commencing in communities soon afterwards.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. When are we likely to see the money and the projects hitting the ground? That question is being asked in the community.

Mr M McGuinness: We had a process to go through, and there was a responsibility on the steering groups to come forward with their proposals, which they have now done. An assessment is now taking place. I believe that we are very close to announcing when the green light will be given. What is important in all of this is that people are coming forward with robust proposals. All those proposals obviously have to be subject to great scrutiny to ensure that they are projects that, when implemented on the ground, will have maximum benefit for local communities.

Mr Nesbitt: Recently, at the Ards Community Network, community groups met to discuss the capital projects that had been agreed in the south-eastern zonal advisory panel. The expression used, I believe, was that Lisburn had "cleaned up", on the basis that it had a full list of shovel-ready projects whereas Ards did not. What is the deputy First Minister's opinion on that? Does he think that that is an appropriate way forward?

Mr M McGuinness: You are dealing with a specific situation in a specific area. The concerns that you raise will now be considered by us. It is important in the context of the steering groups that we ensure that no area is neglected or left out and that those who have responsibility for making decisions are conscious of the reality that they are not just responsible for making decisions to benefit a particular area of the zone. Their responsibility is to ensure that there is equal treatment and that issues raised in other parts of the zone are given serious consideration. In the final analysis, the First Minister and I will make decisions on the funding of the projects. If we are concerned that unfavourable treatment has been given to any area in a zone, it will be our responsibility to ensure that that never happens again.

Mr Eastwood: Are the deputy First Minister and First Minister concerned at the suggestion that lead organisations represented on the social investment fund (SIF) steering committees could be entitled to a 20% management fee for the implementation of authorised projects? Is he concerned that there is a potential conflict of interest there?

Mr M McGuinness: That issue has not been raised before. Given that the Member has raised it now, it is something that we will need to look at. Obviously, we will need to ensure that spend and all of this is done in a way that brings maximum benefit to local communities. The purpose of this is to put in place a fund that will allow communities to come forward with their own proposals. It is not a top-down situation but a bottom-up situation, where communities have the greatest say about what will be put in place for their benefit. If, in the course of all that, any questions arise around the issue that you have raised, we will undertake to look at it.

EU Funding

2. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress in achieving the 20% target set for Departments

in relation to drawing down European funding. (AQO 3940/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jennifer McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We continue to make progress towards meeting the 20% target over the four-year Budget period. In 2011-12 — year 1 — we drew down approximately £15.8 million. We expect to have secured around £13.5 million in additional funding in year 2 — 2012-13. Following the late notification of drawdown, we initiated a mid-term revalidation of the figures supplied by all Departments and are taking the opportunity to ensure that they are robust and comprehensive. That exercise is ongoing, and definitive figures are not yet available. However, we anticipate that the 2010-11 baseline will rise and that the total amount of additional funding to be delivered under the target will increase by at least £5 million. The 20% target will stand, and progress against the more challenging commitment will continue to be monitored and validated by the Programme for Government central team and the delivery oversight group chaired by the head of the Civil Service.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister outline how she thinks our SMEs can benefit more positively from programmes such as Horizon 2020?

Ms J McCann: The first thing to say is that there were some problems and difficulties with SMEs in the previous seventh framework programme. In Horizon 2020, one of the key aims of our economic strategy is to get more companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, engaged in research and development. In 2014-2020, there is up to €800 billion for businesses right across Europe for research, innovation and development. We have set a target of securing €50 million from the framework programme 7. We are on track to significantly exceed that amount with Horizon 2020. I believe that it will be a good opportunity for small and medium-sized businesses to be involved more. Hopefully, the process will be less bureaucratic and SMEs will be able to access those funds.

Mr Campbell: In the context of SMEs applying for European funding, does the junior Minister agree with me that there is sometimes a misunderstanding or lack of awareness or

knowledge about what European funding is available? Does she further agree with me that the approach that Diane Dodds MEP pursued in trying to make people more aware of European funding is a good one and should be adopted by more?

Ms J McCann: The Member is right: any sort of information that people can access should be made available. However, that information has to be brought forward in a recognisable manner. As I said in my previous answer, a lot of SMEs, in particular, find it quite complex to draw down funding.

You mentioned one MEP. I know that another of our MEPs, Martina Anderson, is organising a conference that will be held in Cavan very soon about EU Youth Employment Initiative funding, and she will give out information. It is not currently available to us in the North, but it is available in the South of Ireland. I know that she is keen to bring that information forward.

Mr A Maginness: Is it not time that the Administration took a root-and-branch approach to making Departments conscious of the need to understand European funding and to pursue that funding energetically? Setting a target of 20% is not necessarily sufficient; you have to have the infrastructure to make that drawdown possible.

Ms J McCann: I take the Member's point. As I said, we are trying to increase the drawdown by 20%, but we could go beyond that. We have targets that we will achieve, but it is a complex area of work. When I sat on the ETI Committee, of which you were Chair, it was brought to our attention that small and medium-sized businesses did not have the time to fill in forms. I hope that Horizon 2020 will help those small and medium-sized businesses more, because some of the bigger companies can take a lot of time to do that. I am hopeful that Departments will work with small and medium-sized businesses in helping to draw that down.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. How will she and her colleague use the G8 summit, which President Barroso will attend, to showcase Northern Ireland for additional European funding?

Ms J McCann: I am hopeful that that will happen. When we look at what the South of Ireland has drawn down compared with the figure for the North of Ireland, we see a big potential for Departments to access more funding. Junior Minister Bell and I chair the Barroso task force. We have been in Brussels

several times, where we met people, networked and held meetings. I hope that that will continue because there are opportunities for the North, particularly with employment schemes for our young people. I got figures today that show that 23% of our young people are not in education, employment or training. We need to draw down more moneys to encourage and help them to get back into jobs, education or training.

Gender Pay Gap

3. **Ms Brown** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the gender pay gap. (AQO 3941/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Jennifer McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann: The gender pay gap in average weekly earnings has been narrowing. In 1997, for example, average weekly earnings for women were 74% of the corresponding figure for men. By 2012, the female average had increased to 90% of the male average. Although that is narrowing, it is obviously not good enough. We remain committed to eliminating the gender pay gap and achieving equal value for paid work. That is a key action area for our gender equality strategy.

The Equality Commission's revised code of practice on equal pay will be published shortly, having been approved by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and laid in the Assembly. It will provide updated practical guidance to employers and employees on how to facilitate gender equality in pay structures. It will also help to embed the law in practice, securing equality of opportunity and equal treatment for men and women.

The availability of affordable, quality childcare — I know that there is a later question on this — is an important factor in enabling women to join the workforce, work full-time and progress their career through training, study and promotion. Work to develop a childcare strategy is at an advanced stage, and we aim to make an announcement on that in the next few months.

Ms Brown: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. Some Assembly research shows that the gender pay gap widens with each successive child. What initiatives are planned to eradicate that impact?

Ms J McCann: We have to look at the childcare strategy in the round. Although it will be child-centred and concerned with a child's development, we will look at how we can encourage women in particular back into training or the workforce. A key area will be to make childcare affordable. We will soon report to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and will put the Executive's viewpoint. That will give us an opportunity to look at how Departments are faring under the gender equality strategy as a whole.

2.15 pm

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister give an update on the review of the gender equality strategy?

Ms J McCann: As I said, the gender equality strategy has run from 2006 and will run to 2016. We have responsibility for promoting gender equality across government and addressing gender inequalities. We need to constantly review that strategy to make sure that all Departments carry out its instructions. On matters concerning the strategy, the Department works in close partnership with external gender equality stakeholders and the gender advisory panel. I spoke to some members of that panel, which met recently. There are issues that we still have to solve or challenge. I am convinced that, with that panel and that strategy, we can take that work forward.

Mr Durkan: As OFMDFM is tasked with equality issues, does the junior Minister agree that welfare reform will have a disproportionate impact on women? What measures is OFMDFM considering to alleviate the threat?

Ms J McCann: I agree with the Member that it will have a more serious impact on women and, as a result, on children because it will have an impact on the family. Split payments will have a particularly adverse impact, and we advocate those going to the person who has the general carer role in the family. We need the childcare strategy in place because that will have an impact on women who will now have to look for work and will need affordable, accessible and flexible childcare to do that.

Maze/Long Kesh: Centre of Rural Excellence

4. **Mr Irwin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions they

have had with the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society about creating a centre of rural excellence at the Maze/Long Kesh regeneration site. (AQO 3942/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation launched its vision for the regeneration of Maze/Long Kesh on 24 April. Part of that vision is the creation of a centre of rural excellence on the site. The relocation of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society plays an important part in achieving that vision. Although this is the 145th year of the Balmoral show, it is a first for MLK and the RUAS, which is in the final stages of preparation for the show, which will be held from 15 to 17 May. It is envisaged that the relocation of the RUAS will attract other agriculture-based employers and industries to the site, particularly those in the agrifood and sustainable technology industries. This is a wonderful sign of progress, and I congratulate the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society on choosing the MLK site.

Mr Irwin: I thank the deputy First Minister for his reply. Does he believe that the establishment of a centre of rural excellence by the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society is an important step in the future development of the Maze site?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely agree with the Member. The initial plans include the creation of the new RUAS venue on the site, which comprises permanent and temporary buildings. The venue will be open year-round and provide an array of improved facilities and services, expanding on those offered by the RUAS at the King's Hall complex. Plans also include the development of a large international exhibition facility comprising extensive internal and external exhibition space, a visitor and environmental centre and serviced offices and laboratories. It is estimated that the RUAS plans will support an additional 219 jobs, and the RUAS proposals have the economic potential to facilitate an all-Ireland dimension to the activities. Recently, the First Minister and I were at the site for the unveiling of the development corporation's plans for the entire site, and, during our visit, we took the opportunity to go on a short tour of the RUAS facility. It is absolutely amazing what it has done in only a few months since last year.

All the people who will travel from all over the island of Ireland to see what has been done will be amazed at the progress that has been made and, more importantly, at the great potential for the future. Beyond any doubt, this will be the

premier agricultural show on the island of Ireland. The accessibility of the site is amazing because of its proximity to the M1. If people go there now, as they will do in big numbers in the next number of weeks, they will be pleasantly surprised at how, in a very short time, the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society has turned the situation round. It will give people a fantastic experience when they visit the show, very shortly.

Mr Byrne: I concur with the deputy First Minister about the fantastic work that the RUAS has done. Does he agree that the sooner the legacy project for the Long Kesh site is agreed the better so that the public controversy around that will dissipate?

Mr M McGuinness: Some of the controversy has been contrived controversy. The First Minister and I are absolutely as one in regard to ensuring that work on the peace-building and conflict resolution centre will begin very shortly and will be completed by 2015. We are very focused on and very conscious of the sensitivities and ensuring that the sensitivities of everybody are given great consideration as we move forward with the project.

The First Minister once described the peace-building and conflict resolution centre as a Mecca for tourism: it is also a Mecca for people who have been in conflict in different parts of the world and have come here to listen and, hopefully, learn from our experiences as they go forward with their own peace processes. The First Minister's party, my party and Members from other parties in the Assembly have been very much involved in meeting the requests of negotiators from other parts of the world who seek to lend their experience to the resolution of conflict in places such as Colombia, Burma, Sri Lanka and the Middle East. Only last week, at Magee university in Derry, I spoke at the Colombian peace proposals dialogue that was taking place there. It is hugely heart-warming to see that there are people in far-flung regions of the world who are absolutely and totally knowledgeable about the changes that have happened here and to see their desire to travel here to learn from our experiences. It is our duty and our responsibility, because we have been assisted by people such as those in the African National Congress and the president at that time, Nelson Mandela. All the parties in this Assembly travelled to South Africa at the invitation of President Mandela. The experiences that we learnt on conflict resolution have stood the test of time.

Mr Copeland: I thank Mr Irwin for asking the question and the deputy First Minister for his answers thus far. Without doubt, the development at the Maze is absolutely vital to the economic future of that region and, indeed, possibly all of Northern Ireland. However, regarding the peace centre, which is part of the development, do any business cases exist or are any projections available that indicate at which stage it will become self-sufficient in generating income? Will it be forever dependent for any length of time on subvention?

Mr M McGuinness: The development commission is producing a paper for our consideration on the operation mechanism for the peace-building and conflict resolution centre. On 18 April, the planning application to build the centre was approved by the Minister of the Environment, and the centre will have a key international role in peace-building to help our society move on and to help others on the road from conflict to peace. The project secured something like €20 million from EU Peace funding to help to build the centre by 2015. Of course, there has been extensive stakeholder engagement.

All the empirical evidence tells us that this will not be a drain on our resources but will make something in the region of £1 million per year and bring about the employment of something like 70 people. Given the tremendous progress that the RUAS has made and that the construction of the peace-building and conflict resolution centre will take place shortly, we can say with great authority that this is a fantastic site. It will employ in the region of 5,000 people when it is fully developed, and its integrated nature will lend itself to becoming a major attraction to many people not just on this island but from many parts of the world. They will want to come and see a site that, in many ways, symbolises the transformation of politics in the North of Ireland.

Delivering Social Change: Social Enterprise

5. **Mrs Overend** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many business start-ups and jobs have been created by the social enterprise hubs proposed as part of the signature projects. (AQO 3943/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Work on the implementation of the six Delivering Social Change signature programmes that were announced by the First Minister and me on 10 October 2012 is progressing. In taking forward

this initial phase of work, the Department that leads on each of the programmes is responsible for developing delivery and implementation plans. OFMDFM is responsible for co-ordinating the development, implementation and evaluation of the six programmes. The Department for Social Development is working in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the signature programme to create 10 social enterprise incubation hubs. The hubs will be established in currently vacant commercial premises and will offer a range of business advice and practical support to social enterprise entrepreneurs. At this stage in the programme, no hub has opened and, therefore, no jobs or businesses have yet been created. Further detail on the specific aspects of the programme should be sought directly from the lead Department, which is the Department for Social Development.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for that answer. Will he give an indication of the targets for job creation across the signature projects? Are we on course to meet those targets?

Mr M McGuinness: This is an important and ambitious programme. Delivering Social Change is the Executive's comprehensive delivery framework to co-ordinate efforts right across Departments to take forward work on priority social policy areas. The framework's initial focus has been on the needs of children and families, to ensure that the most urgent and significant problems in our society are addressed, problems such as poor educational outcomes, poor physical and mental health, economic inactivity, social exclusion and disadvantage. Initial work aims to deliver the following two outcomes: a sustained reduction in poverty and associated issues across all age groups; and an improvement in the health, well-being and life opportunities of children and young people, thereby breaking the long-term cycle of multigenerational problems.

Childcare Strategy

6. **Ms Boyle** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the childcare strategy. (AQO 3944/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann: The development and delivery of the childcare strategy is a key Programme for Government commitment, and the Executive are determined to deliver a strategy that will

make a real and practical difference to the lives of parents and children. Public consultation on the childcare strategy ended on 5 March 2013, and we are pleased to report that the consultation attracted a wide and constructive range of proposals and suggestions. It was particularly welcome to see so many of the key childcare stakeholders undertake their own consultation exercises in parallel to ours. That has greatly added to the depth and diversity of the proposals that we have received. All the consultation responses received are currently being considered and reviewed. Together with the findings of the research that we have commissioned, they will inform the detail of the strategy, including the actions that will support, the timing of those actions and the resources that will be needed to enable the strategy to be implemented. We expect to be able to make an announcement on the strategy shortly.

Ms Boyle: I thank the junior Minister for her response to the question. Will she outline some of the issues emerging from the recent childcare strategy? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms J McCann: A number of issues have arisen, as I said. One was school-age childcare, particularly for the 5-to-11 age group, which was identified as a gap.

We are looking at that. It is particularly important to create a space for young children to learn through play, and it is also important to support parents. Another area where there was a gap was with children with disabilities. Again, we will look at that when we look at the whole process. There were other conclusions, but those two came out time and time again when we looked at the consultation responses.

2.30 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Common Agricultural Policy

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on common agricultural policy negotiations, particularly in relation to seeking regional variation in the best interests of the agriculture industry. (AQO 3954/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The negotiations on CAP reform have progressed significantly. First, we

had the European Council agreement on the EU Budget on 8 February, followed by the European Parliament and the Council reaching their positions on CAP reform on 13 March and 19 March respectively. Those developments paved the way for dialogues between the European Commission, the Council and the Parliament. The dialogues commenced on 11 April and are now well under way, with the aim of reaching an overall agreement by the end of June 2013. That timetable is challenging as a number of key differences between the institutions remain, especially on transition towards flat-rate support and market management.

Regional flexibility is an extremely important principle. The Commission's original proposals included some regional flexibility, and that has been added to in the latest agreed presidency text. It is extremely important for my Department that decisions on all options within the direct payments regulation can be taken at regional level. That requires that the overall ceiling of the direct payments regulation can be sub-divided into regional ceilings and that regions can take the decisions on how much to allocate to the various direct payment options in the same way that a member state will do, including any decisions to transfer between pillars. During discussions at the Agriculture Council in March, I pushed a number of our key priorities and objectives, particularly regionalisation, the active farmer definition and the need for a simpler internal convergence mechanism. I also stressed to Minister Simon Coveney the need for regional flexibility. I intend to be present at the May and June EU Agricultural Councils. I will continue to press for a clear and unambiguous outcome on regionalisation that permits us, within our share of the CAP budget, to take all relevant decisions that will ensure that we meet local needs.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her detailed reply. Given that the stalemate between the Parliament, the Council and the other institutions has been broken, what is the Minister's estimate for reaching agreement before the end of June? In particular, has she undertaken any discussions recently, either with the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach or the Minister for Agriculture in the South, Mr Coveney?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, we are working towards the June 2013 deadline, and that will be key for us to be able to implement, design and legislate for a new CAP post 2015. Therefore, we are keenly working towards that date, but there is no doubt that it is a challenging date. The next number of months will be crucial.

With regard to my ongoing discussions with Minister Coveney, I am meeting him again in the morning to further discuss CAP and the movement forward over the next number of months. However, it is key that all pressure is applied to make sure that we get the deal through in June, because that will allow us the time necessary to develop local legislation that will allow us to deliver and implement the new common agricultural policy. The June deadline is still there, and whether or not we achieve that is in the hands of the Commission, the Council and the Parliament. However, I will make sure that I continue to put pressure on, and I will continue discussions with Simon Coveney in that regard.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that the European Parliament have seemingly yet to agree the multi-annual financial framework, can she give us her assessment of how damaging to the entire CAP reform process it would be if MEPs could not arrive at final approval of that by June before the presidency is passed over to the seemingly much more reluctant Lithuania?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As I said, getting the decision in June is absolutely key and will be pivotal for us in moving forward and designing a new scheme. The nature of codecision-making, as we have in Europe, means that we have to get all the players to agree. The Commission, the Parliament and the Council all have to come to an agreement. That has been difficult. We have had some positive progress, and there has been a lot of agreement on some of the major issues. However, a number are still outstanding, so the next two months will be crucial for the CAP negotiations.

I will continue to fight our corner for the regional flexibility that we need here to suit our needs. Since the start of the process, we have consistently argued for a well-funded, flexible, simplified CAP, and that continues to be our position. We have made progress, but the three organisations need to agree on all the key issues. We will not get agreement come June if that is not the case, so we will continue to push for that in the time ahead.

Ms Lo: I understand that there is a strong environmental element in the CAP reform. What discussions has the Minister had with Department of the Environment (DOE) officials?

Mrs O'Neill: Officials continue to engage on an ongoing basis throughout the process, because CAP reform brings very significant

environmental benefits. For me, it is about getting a balance. We need to look after the environment, and farmers are rightly the custodians of the countryside and have a pivotal role to play. The Commission is very clear about linking the supports that are paid to farmers to improving the environment. That is something that we support, but there has to be a very flexible approach to that. Those discussions are ongoing, and my officials will continue to engage with DOE officials as the negotiations heat up over the next number of months.

Broadband: Fermanagh

2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the areas of Fermanagh to which she plans to allocate further resources to improve rural broadband coverage. (AQO 3955/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to announce to the House today that the £5 million that I am committing to the broadband delivery project will be used exclusively to target rural areas of high deprivation across the North that currently have no fixed wire infrastructure to access broadband. I hope that the funding will stimulate companies supplying broadband to get into rural areas and to use the infrastructure to provide access to rural dwellers and businesses to use broadband. I want the investment to stimulate rural businesses and give rural dwellers a wider access to services via broadband.

Regarding Fermanagh, there are some 4,000 premises listed as being rural across 977 postcodes. I want as many of those premises as possible to benefit from our funding. Although areas of high deprivation will initially be funded as a priority, funding will be rolled out across as many of the rural "not spots" as possible. My Department is also involved in some other initiatives to encourage better take-up of broadband, particularly by farmers. All of us need to think seriously about using broadband as a better way to do business.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer and for her announcement to the House that this is finally going to be invested in, although I thought that she was going to say that it was going to be exclusively for Fermanagh.

Will the Minister provide the House with an update as to when the initiative will begin and when we can expect to see an improvement on the ground?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that he is very glad to hear that the project will benefit all rural dwellers in the North and not just those in Fermanagh. He asked about the timescale and delivery. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) project, which we are engaging with, has already started, and the procurement and implementation on the ground is to start in the summer, so we are very quickly coming up to that date. The intention is that the project will be finished by spring 2015, with many elements in place not long after the project hits the ground. The aim is to get access to as many people as possible, but for some of the more complicated and hard-to-reach areas, the timescale is until spring 2015.

Mr Elliott: Has the Minister held any discussions with service providers of broadband who might provide additional service for the Fermanagh area, given that the G8 is imminent in County Fermanagh? How could we utilise that in the longer term?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. The G8 will be a very important event for Fermanagh, and we want to make sure that all the support systems are in place and that the Executive have a very proactive approach to making sure that the G8 benefits the Fermanagh area.

The DETI communications project will start to roll out the broadband programme this summer, and it will target all areas across the North, not just Fermanagh in particular. I am quite sure that DETI is very mindful that the G8 is coming, and if there are particular needs there, you may want to raise those with DETI.

My meetings with service providers are ongoing. I have met many service providers because I am committed to making sure that we get broadband access into all rural areas. People in rural areas should not be discriminated against, pay more or have no access to services just because of where they live. That is the project that I am committed to taking forward and why I have got involved, particularly to address the needs of rural dwellers.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister ensure that the DETI people are aware of the considerable black spots around Limavady and Ballykelly, particularly given the imminence of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) relocation to that area?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I am happy to relay that to DETI, but I am sure that he could take advantage of talking to his party colleague the Minister Arlene Foster as well. Having access to broadband will be a key factor in the DARD headquarters move to Ballykelly, and we will make sure that that is part of the planning process.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí go nuige. Is the Minister's Department looking at specific areas, such as the Loughshore area of east Tyrone and down into south Derry, where broadband accessibility for business is proving to be a big problem? We also hear reports at this time of A-level students having difficulties accessing details and material via broadband.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. The examples that he referred to are examples that I would encounter, which is why I got involved in the project and put forward £5 million to target rural broadband provision. I could name plenty of areas in mid-Ulster, such as the Loughshore, Pomeroy and Galbally, that are "not spots" and do not have access to broadband or have slow broadband connections. However, that is the case in many rural areas across the North, which is why we have to have a targeted programme that looks at how we reach those hard-to-reach people. It is frustrating if you live in a rural area and hear people calling for faster speeds when you cannot get even the minimum speed necessary. The project has to be about targeting those "not spots" and reaching those dwellers in rural communities. However, there are also business people and students; coursework and everything else is done online now. They all need to be able to access broadband, which is why I put forward the £5 million to tackle that problem. I look forward to working with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to make sure that that is delivered in the speediest manner possible.

Farmers: Hardship Package

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the hardship package for farmers. (AQO 3956/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have obtained Executive agreement for hardship funding measures to assist farmers worst affected by livestock losses arising from the recent snowstorm.

The first element of those measures is that my Department is paying for the collection and disposal of animals that died as a direct result of the snowstorm. Postcodes of the worst affected areas were identified from calls to the DARD helpline, and all farmers in those areas had their fallen stock collected and disposed of by approved renderers from 2 to 19 April. I also made arrangements in my Department to include in the scheme any farmer calling the DARD helpline from outside the published postcode list who lost livestock arising from the snowstorm. To date, 43,558 sheep and 1,142 cattle have been collected. Of the sheep, just under 72% of losses were lambs.

This week, I intend to bring proposals to the Executive for the second element of the hardship scheme, which is to help to mitigate the livestock losses that were sustained by farmers. The payment will be under the EU de minimis rules and capped at a maximum of €7,500 per farmer, and it will include collection and disposal costs. Farmers who had livestock losses as a result of the snowstorm and had fallen stock disposed of by the approved renderers will be eligible for the hardship funding. The scheme will be based on information compiled on the nature and extent of losses sustained by farmers who had stock removed and disposed of by the approved renderers. I will release details of the scheme and how to apply as soon as possible.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. What is the timeline for rolling out that scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: When I was out and about and met farmers who experienced such difficulty over the snow period, the one thing they said was that they needed the payment as quickly as possible to assist them because cash flow would be a big problem for them when looking to replace stock. When I announced the hardship scheme, I said that I would try to make it as simple as possible and ensure that we got the payments out as quickly as possible. I will bring the detail of that to the Executive on Thursday. My intention is that farmers will receive a letter in early June and have their payment by the end of June, at which time we expect all farmers to be paid.

2.45 pm

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Does she agree that many farmers are suffering badly because of the cash flow situation and that immediate cash payments are

needed? Is the Minister giving serious consideration to making a minimum payment of £2,000, and how much extra does she hope to get from the Executive at their meeting on Thursday?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure that the Member can appreciate that, procedurally, it is important that I go to the Executive with the hardship scheme first. He will be aware that I intend to meet the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee directly afterwards to inform it of the outcome of the Executive's discussions.

As I said clearly from the start, this is not a compensation scheme; it is to mitigate the loss that farmers experienced. I said that I would try to make the scheme as simple as possible and that I would get the money out quickly. I believe that I am delivering on that and look forward to the Executive's discussion on Thursday on getting the scheme cleared, putting it to the Assembly and going through the proper process.

I accept that cash flow is a problem, which is why I am hoping that getting the payment out as quickly as possible will assist. We have also been working very hard over the past months to make sure that we can get countryside management and less-favoured area payments out as early as possible, which will help to get money into farmers' pockets as quickly as possible.

I am also ensuring that banks are aware of the situation that farmers are experiencing and making sure that they are sympathetic to their plight. We will continue to do that. There are other practical supports on the ground, such as benchmarking and looking towards business development plans.

We need to do a combination of things, but I am sure that the Member will respect the fact that I need to go to the Executive on Thursday and that I will be happy to talk to the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee directly afterwards.

Mr Frew: I appreciate the Minister's answers on this matter and the fact that she will have to go to the Executive to get approval for whatever hardship fund is put in place. Given what she has detailed today, I ask her this: if this is about loss and percentage loss to a farmer, what about the livestock that have not been found and could have been lifted by another farmer or through a different collection scheme? How do we measure that?

Mrs O'Neill: This was an extreme weather situation that posed a number of challenges. I wanted to be clear that we had to measure the loss, which is why the fallen animal scheme was the first phase of the process. I also made it clear that I did not want farmers to endanger themselves by going up into dangerous parts or high hills to bring sheep down. We asked farmers to ring us and discuss with officials other ways in which they could prove that they had those sheep.

We can find practical ways around these things, notwithstanding it being difficult, because you have to be able to stand over the loss. I encourage any farmers who are in doubt, or who find themselves in that situation, to come forward and talk to DARD officials if they have not already done so. We have been able to find a way forward for some farmers in that situation. If there is anything in particular that the Member can suggest, I will be very glad to hear from him after Question Time.

Mr Allister: What proposals does the Minister have for farmers whose losses well exceed the de minimis cap? Will those who suffered most proportionately receive the least?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As I said, I will take the scheme to the Executive on Thursday, and I am happy to provide members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and other Members with more detail after the Executive have agreed it on Thursday.

This is not a compensation scheme: I have been very clear about that from the start. It is a hardship scheme that is aimed at mitigating loss. The scheme will look towards measuring the loss and making a payment based on that loss. Arguments have been made for a flat rate payment, but I do not think that that would stand up to public accounts scrutiny. I am sure that the Member would not propose that as the way to go. The scheme is fair and is aimed at getting money out quickly and mitigating loss. Some farmers' losses were exceptional, and there is quite a range involved, from people who lost single numbers of animals to those who lost hundreds. The hardship payment that people will receive will be proportionate to their loss.

Mrs Dobson: Does the Minister accept, with hindsight, that her language when announcing the package was deeply unfair and unbecoming of a Minister? Minister, why did you completely fail to adequately inform farmers at the

beginning that the cost of lifting dead stock would be taken out of their compensation?

Mrs O'Neill: The simple answer is no. From the start of the process, I have been very clear and upfront with farmers about what the scheme is about. It is a hardship scheme; it is not compensation, but it brings in some measures that will assist those in the farming community who have experienced severe difficulty due to the snow. I think that, from the start, my language has been appropriate, as has the response, particularly the practical measures and the hardship scheme. I have been engaging with the farming unions and the farming sector. The Member can continue to look for criticism, but she will not find it because, by and large, the farming community is content with the approach being taken.

Agri-Food Strategy Board

4. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the outcomes of the Agri-Food Strategy Board. (AQO 3957/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I have recently taken receipt of a strategic action plan from the Agri-Food Strategy Board chair, Tony O'Neill. I take this opportunity to place on record my thanks to Tony and his fellow board members for their work to date.

The board has produced an extensive report, the development of which was influenced by significant stakeholder input, with over 80 representatives on 10 sectoral working groups. We are in the process of considering its content, which identifies ambitious growth targets and a series of recommendations across key themes.

I welcome the board's recognition that agrifood is vital to the local economy and as a single supply chain, with each partner treated fairly and working towards the same goal to meet the needs of the marketplace. The board worked as one to agree the report, and it is envisaged that the board will remain in place for a further two years to lead and oversee its implementation. It is vital that the implementation and delivery of any recommendations follow this partnership approach to maximise the benefit to and prosperity of our industry.

We hope to be in a position to share the report's findings next week to tie in with the Balmoral show.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the progress made by the board. Will the Minister outline whether the strategy will operate on an all-island basis to benefit the industry across the island?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the report has been published by the board, and the board has been representative of those across the whole supply chain. I think that the fact that all partners in the supply chain have agreed the action plan will be one of its strengths. It is my belief that there are many, many benefits and efficiencies to be achieved by working on an all-Ireland basis, particularly in marketing, safeguarding animal and plant health, sharing best practice and research and development. So we will continue to drive forward with the strategy. I look forward to publishing more details of the report and having more discussion on it. This report has been quite a time in the making, but there are many potential benefits for the agrifood industry to be taken forward as a result. There are natural benefits to all-island working, which will, I am sure, be an element of the report.

Dr McDonnell: The Minister mentioned sharing the report's findings with us next week. Does that mean that the full report will be published next week? Beyond publication, what is the timeline for the strategy's implementation?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, this was a joint project taken forward by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and me, and we will meet next week to discuss the next steps. We have just received the report and are looking at over 100 recommendations. I look forward to getting an action plan in place to deliver and implement them. Obviously, we will need time to consider the recommendations and decide on the best steps forward. We will release the report at the Balmoral show, given that this is a significant event for the agrifood industry and the fact that it has moved to a new site. After we launch the report there next week, it will become public. The report will be of significant help in enabling us to consider the next steps, look towards the new rural development programme and look at how we target support for the industry.

Mrs Overend: Minister, it is more or less one year since the appointment of members to the Agri-Food Strategy Board. I note the good work done thus far to prepare the strategic plan, but when will producers begin to see some benefit from the board? Do you believe that all producers — meat, vegetable and horticulture — will benefit?

Mrs O'Neill: The beauty of the board is that everybody has been represented from right across the supply chain. The fact that all the recommendations have been signed off by the whole supply chain, because they are all represented, will be the beauty of the report, as well as being able to design measures and an action plan to take it forward. It has to benefit everybody because, if there is no fairness in the supply chain, there will not be a proper supply chain. As I have always said, the key to the report has always been fairness in the supply chain. I am looking forward to having further consultation on the way forward and talking to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about that. Key to that will be fairness in the supply chain; that it benefits everybody; that nobody is disadvantaged; and that we look at future challenges.

As you said, the report has been in the making for almost a year. It was a very large piece of work. We put the board in place for a three-year period. It has taken almost a year to pull together and produce the report. We will publish it next week, as I said. The board is in place for a further two years to see through the implementation. As I said in a previous answer, the rural development programme will be the tool, if you like, to allow us to shape supports towards the industry. The report will show where we need to put in the effort. The rural development programme will be the vehicle that allows us to deliver. The next number of months will be a busy time, when we will ensure that we have proper supports in place and that they meet the challenges that have been thrown up as a result of that major piece of work.

Forests: Recreational and Social Strategy

5. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the health benefits that would result from the recreational and social strategy for the forest estate. (AQO 3958/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The physical and mental health benefits of outdoor recreation and, specifically, a proximity to trees and woodland are well reported. Forests are a naturally therapeutic environment that can have a positive effect on anxiety and depression by reducing stress and mental fatigue. Forests offer facilities to improve physical health, including eco-trails, cycle trails, walks and horse-riding opportunities. Increasingly, they are being used for a wide range of activities across all the forests.

The Department has recently secured £4 million over two years under the economy and jobs initiative. I am keen to see partnerships with councils and others that take forward proposals to enhance forest facilities in order to encourage greater use.

Forest Service will continue to engage with a number of organisations and other Departments, including the Health Promotion Agency, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to share understanding of how forests can be promoted in order to tackle issues such as obesity and mental health. Forest Service continues to encourage partners to further develop that work, including finding ways to measure the societal benefits for physical and mental health. Improving the capability to evaluate such outcomes will help to inform the development of future projects.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I appreciate the Minister's answer. Will she outline any work that she is doing to address mental health issues in rural areas?

Mrs O'Neill: One recent event that we launched was a joint initiative with my ministerial colleagues from DCAL and DHSSPS, along with the Public Health Agency, the GAA and the main sporting bodies for soccer and rugby, to provide help, advice and support to those in rural areas who suffer from poor mental health. That initiative will have a positive impact on those who suffer from poor mental health in rural areas. One issue, about which the Member will be very aware through her role as Chair of the Health Committee, is that we need to tackle stigma. That is what the project and that piece of work is about: saying that it is OK to ask for help. It is important that more and more people from sporting organisations and others come forward and say that. I was delighted to be involved in that piece of work.

The Department is also providing funding for Rural Support, which is a charitable organisation that works with rural dwellers who experience farming and social difficulties, as well as a whole range of other issues. I have also been able to provide support to the Niamh Louise Foundation, which, again, is a charitable organisation that was set up to support those who have been bereaved by suicide across Tyrone and Armagh.

There is positive work going on with regard to mental health. Promoting good mental health is every Department's business, not just that of

the Health Department. I am glad to be able to play my role to support that work and ensure that there are proper initiatives on the ground that benefit people.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you very much for squeezing me in, Mr Speaker. The Minister will know that mountain-biking is another increasingly popular recreational activity in forest parks. Maybe she could update the House on recent developments. Given that it has been a year since I last asked her, can she tell us whether she has got round to getting out on a bike herself in a forest park?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Recently, I opened the Davagh forest trails outside Cookstown. That was a partnership project that we took forward with Cookstown District Council. They are fantastic mountain-biking trails. I was on a tandem in Davagh forest. The Department's policy on social and recreational use of forests is about opening up forests and developing more of those trails.

We now have over 50% of Forest Service land opened up to the public because of agreements with local councils. To me, that is very positive, and I look forward to seeing a lot more of it in the future. I will open up the Castlewellan trail in the next number of weeks as well. It is all brilliant work. I know that mountain bike tourism has become very popular, and it will continue to have great tourism potential for us.

3.00 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

DCAL: Honours

1. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many names of people in the culture, arts and leisure sector have been forwarded to her for nomination for honours. (AQO 3969/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I have no role in the honours process, no names have been forwarded to me for nominations.

Mrs Overend: How does the Minister ensure that Olympians, for example, or others in the culture sector are given appropriate consideration for honours?

Ms Ní Chuilín: My permanent secretary is responsible for that. The names that go forward to the permanent secretary for selection are restricted. However, I believe that the broad suite of services provided through the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) are represented in any nominations.

Lord Morrow: Since we are talking about honours, I am sure that the Minister, like everybody else, will be aware that Glentoran won the Irish Cup on Saturday afternoon after defeating Cliftonville, who had just secured the Irish League title, 3-1. Has the Minister any plans to invite Glentoran Football Club up to the Assembly for a reception to honour them for their great achievement?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. An invitation was issued to Glentoran this morning. I would like to put on record my congratulations to Cliftonville for the league, Glentoran for the Irish Cup and, indeed, Newtonington for winning the amateur league.

Mr Frew: Ballymena.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Somebody mentioned some other team.

The Member will perhaps accept an invitation, which is open to every Member, to receive Cliftonville Football Club in Parliament Buildings tonight. I think that the achievements particularly in soccer in recent times are a good reflection on the level of sport.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister accept that sport is brimming with people deserving of honours because of huge achievement? Should we, therefore, put the dearth of recommendations from her Department down to bigotry and bias because the honours are perceived to be British? Is that the truth?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely not. The Member making accusations of sectarianism, bigotry and bias with absolutely no proof seems to be a consistent feature. As I said to Mrs Overend, the DCAL permanent secretary has made recommendations to the head of the Civil Service that, I believe and understand, are in keeping with the broad DCAL family. I have to say that it is a bit rich for the Member to persist in making these accusations. I think that you either need to put up or shut up.

Ms Lo: I am sure that the Minister is aware that there are not many ethnic minority individuals from the CAL sector getting nominations or honours. Has she any plans to encourage nominations from the sector?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assure the Member that I will make sure that her comments and concerns are forwarded to my interim permanent secretary, who is due to come into the Department. However, I am sure that the deputy permanent secretary is listening as we speak and will take on board your concerns.

Irish Football Association Clubs: Funding

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the funding offered to Irish Football Association clubs over the past two years. (AQO 3970/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI has primary responsibility for the distribution of funding to sport. Over the past two years, it has offered approximately £1.6 million of funding to Irish Football Association (IFA) clubs. Furthermore, I made a bid to the Executive in the last round last year for additional funding towards programmes aimed at promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion through sport. In 2012-13, the IFA received an additional half a million pounds through that programme, and that has benefited football clubs through a range of projects and initiatives.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that brief summary. Is her Department committed to the £36 million financial package that was addressed in the last Programme for Government? Will there be a commitment on that money in the next CSR period?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely confirm that I am committed to ensuring that the Programme for Government commitments for this mandate are delivered and those for the next mandate are honoured.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware that the Milk Cup is an exceptionally important youth football tournament and that the finals have not been held in Coleraine for the past few years because of the state of Coleraine Showgrounds. Will she ensure that her support and that of her Department is forthcoming to try to speed up the transition between the showgrounds and a proposed new ground at Rugby Avenue, Coleraine?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I cannot comment on the specifics of the Member's proposal, because I believe that that is what it is — a proposal. However, I am committed to looking at the facilities management plan on subregional stadia that I hope to receive from the Irish Football Association in the coming months. I met those responsible for the Milk Cup at an event in Derry last week honouring sport and sporting activities. I have huge respect for those involved in the Milk Cup and the Foyle Cup. I believe that what they do is totally essential, and I recognise that there are challenges with facilities, particularly for soccer. So, when I receive that facilities development plan, I am sure that Coleraine and other clubs in the north-west will be included for redevelopment.

Mr Ó hOisín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Who have been the major recipients of IFA funding in the past couple of years?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will detail offers that were made to Irish Football Association clubs certainly in the past two years. If the Member wants specific information about the time before that, I am happy to write to him. In the past two years, Crusaders Football Club, Carrick Rangers Football Club, Moneyslane Football Club, Shankill United Football Club, Crumlin United Football Club and Institute Football Club have all been made offers of funding. As I said, if the Member wants me to go back further than that, I am happy to write to him with those details.

Fishery Offences

3. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department is taking to tackle and reduce the number of fishery offences. (AQO 3971/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. My officials are undertaking a review of the Department's policy and procedures to ensure that our compliance and enforcement arrangements relating to fishing are appropriate. The review will also consider changes to regulations relating to the practices and permitted methods of fishing on the basis of scientific advice, best practice and the views of stakeholder interests. As the Member is aware, my Department plays an important role in protecting, conserving and enhancing our local fisheries resource. Illegal fishing has a significant negative impact on fishing stocks and their supported habitats, and DCAL adopts

a consistent, proportionate and transparent approach to addressing all illegal activity.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that most responsible members of fishing clubs do not violate the law or catch fish illegally? If possible, will she outline the amount of money that has been collected in fines over the past five years?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will have to write to the Member with that information, but I will repeat the sentiments: all the stakeholders I have met so far are totally committed to our rivers and waterways. They are the guarantors of the rivers, as I have said before. They help the Department by acting as bailiffs and custodians for our lakes and waterways, and I do not believe that any of them is either involved in illegal fishing or tolerant of it. They have huge respect for our fishing stock and are totally involved in conservation and compliance. I look forward to their involvement in the review, because I believe that their views should be reflected throughout it.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her work on this. How much time has she put in to working with the police and bailiffs to make sure that we reach zero tolerance of poaching in our loughs or rivers?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Let me repeat that I have zero tolerance for poaching and zero tolerance for illegal fishing. My Department has been proactive in working with the PSNI, bailiffs and stakeholders, such as angling clubs, across our waterways. My fisheries branch has been very proactive, and I pay tribute to it. From what I have seen, I think it is fairly well respected throughout the angling community. It works very closely with the PSNI and others to make sure that there is a zero tolerance approach to illegal fishing.

Rural Development White Paper: Poverty and Social Exclusion

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how her Department is contributing to the rural development White Paper, particularly relating to her priority of promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion. (AQO 3972/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL has four actions in the rural White Paper action plan. We will continue, with the support of DARD, to approve detailed action plans for the delivery, for example, of the Sport Matters strategy that will include provision

for sport in rural areas and among rural dwellers. We will also work with the Arts Council to ensure a geographic spread across all its programmes. In addition, we will enable a broad and diverse range of the population to participate in culture, arts and leisure activities. We have also worked to disseminate further the development of the Líofa initiative in rural areas. As the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development said earlier in her Question Time, we are working closely with other Ministers and Departments, particularly around health and well-being.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she outline what her Department is doing to tackle poverty and social exclusion in a strategic manner?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate that rural-proofing has to be right at the centre of any strategic development to tackle poverty and social exclusion. To that end, I have set DCAL's key priority as tackling poverty and social exclusion. That will be mainstreamed in all our departmental business and in business plans from arm's-length bodies to reflect that in a meaningful way. That joined-up approach will mean that we avoid the risk of paying lip service, particularly to rural dwellers, when talking about tackling disadvantage. That includes a particular focus on collaborative initiatives, such as those recently under way in the Executive's Delivering Social Change framework. Each Department will see outputs in its areas, particularly for rural areas and rural dwellers.

Mrs McKeivitt: In these times of austerity, I would like the Minister to dwell on her plans to target low-income families experiencing social exclusion due to the inaccessibility of sports facilities in their area.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member has raised this before. It is something that I experienced even before I came to the Department. Almost 99% of sporting activity is at a voluntary level. Looking at the economic situation that we are in, I see that the cost of public liability insurance, transport and hiring out pitches and halls, particularly when the facilities are not there, all mounts up. It puts an added pressure on clubs when they just want to get on with sport. I am looking at proposals, particularly for hard-pressed areas, and at ways in which DCAL and the Executive can give further support. At this stage, it is very premature, but I say to the Member that I am very conscious of

it. The Member is a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and the proposals, when finished, will be brought to that Committee for scrutiny.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister give a commitment that the eight rural libraries that were closed in October 2011 will remain open, given the importance of those rural communities?

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the whole House and Members generally that the question must, as far as possible, relate to the original question in the Order Paper. We should move on.

Re-imaging Communities

5. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what her Department is doing to help with reimagining communities in working-class areas. (AQO 3973/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive's urban and neighbourhood regeneration strategies encompass programmes being taken forward by a number of Departments. DCAL is the sponsor Department for the Arts Council, which is administering the Building Peace through the Arts — Re-Imaging Communities programme.

I recently met the Member at his request. I will have further meetings with a group of artists who highlighted to me changes in the programme and how those impact on them. One of the things that is very clear to me, which I have heard not just from you and the group that you met but from others, is that, although I acknowledge the benefits of an open competition — that is crucial — there is a need to ensure that there is stronger community buy-in. I am happy to have a discussion with the Arts Council and Executive colleagues to make sure that it is a fully inclusive process.

3.15 pm

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Is the Minister able to assure me that her Department and the Arts Council will be able to offer support and guidance for any applications that are made by communities for reimagining?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is crucial that the Arts Council gives that support. Let us be frank: most of the reimagining that happens in our communities is done by community artists. That is the best way to get buy-in. It is not just about buy-in. You are also supporting the economy and local artists, which, I believe, we need to do more of.

We cannot become snifty because they are mural artists. I am not saying that that is the case, but I am certainly not having that on my watch. There is also better maintenance of murals when there is community buy-in, as schools, churches, clubs and so on become involved in it. That will be the test of how we succeed, not only in changing the face of our communities but in creating better relations and in better improving relations in the long term.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. Will the Minister tell us why additional measures should be included in a public procurement process to appoint artists in the reimagining programme?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am certainly not saying that we should ignore or try to subvert any procurement process. To be clear: I am not saying that at all. I believe that additional criteria and additional measures need to be added to it.

I will repeat what I said in answer to Mr Alex Easton's question: I believe that, particularly for people who are involved in community art, there needs to be an added element of sustainability. After all, a lot of this is about peace-building and maintaining the peace that has been made. It is crucial that that additional measure is added to the criteria, particularly for artists who are working with and part of a community that has been affected by a mural and wants to change it. As well as that, if this is truly about peace-building and building good relations for the future, it would be foolish for any of us to ignore the opportunity to bring along people who, quite frankly, have been kept at arm's length.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Will she elaborate a bit? Does she believe that the Arts Council's Re-imaging Communities project has achieved its goals so far?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It has, but I suppose that the undertone of that question is whether we could do better. I think that we can; collectively, we can. Through the added partners in OFMDFM and in the SEUPB, we need to look at what we have done well so far and what we can improve on and set about making those improvements. Unless you are active about taking on board what people say, making sure that it adds value and benefits the programme and helps to sustain peace and regenerate the local economy, you are really just paying lip service and lashing a programme out to tick a box. I am certainly not about ticking boxes.

Mr McGimpsey: What criteria does the Minister use to determine which images and murals are appropriate for reimagining?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have the criteria here, but it is about the community coming up with plans for murals that they would like to change. It is about what the community wants. It is not about me sitting down with a list and saying, "I will keep that" or "I will remove this". That is not an open and transparent way of doing business. The Member should know. He has been a Minister in this Department. The programme is based on the criteria that the Arts Council has set, and I am happy to send that information to him. It is about making sure that it is a full and inclusive process with full community buy-in. Surely the Member can recognise that, if the community feels that a mural needs to be changed and is responsible for that change and the design, the future sustainability not just of that mural but of other murals in the community will be much enhanced.

Lough Neagh Eel Fishery

6. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether a blanket ban on the Lough Neagh eel fishery will take place without adequate and supported scientific evidence. (AQO 3974/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. A draft report presented to the European Parliament's fisheries committee proposed measures to ban commercial eel fishing in view of the decline in European eel stocks. In view of the threat posed to the Lough Neagh eel fishery and the potential impact on the local community, I acted quickly and decisively to protect the interests of our local fishery. I made it absolutely clear at the time and I reiterate the position that I will not consider any proposals for the recovery of EU eel stocks without appropriate and independent scientific evidence. In addition, I will insist on an equality impact assessment, full consultation with stakeholder interests and appropriate compensation from Europe for eel fishermen affected during any proposed suspension.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire. How is the Department providing support for the Lough Neagh eel fishery?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Other questions have been tabled on fishing, but I assure the Member that my fisheries division, along with the Lough Neagh eel fishery partnership in this instance, supports sustainable economic growth and the

development of the Lough Neagh fishery. Under the European Fisheries Fund, DCAL has provided financial support for the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd to purchase elvers for stocking, and it has received almost £750,000 for that purpose. We look forward to working with the co-operative on the future development of the Lough Neagh fishery because this is an activity that has been passed down from generation to generation, as the Member will know as it is in his constituency. There is also a heritage aspect. I do not want people living around the lough to be further disadvantaged by a proposal from a Member in Europe, which looked as though it was trying to impose it on our fisheries. I am certainly not having that.

Mrs D Kelly: I live along the lough shore, Minister, and I welcome your refusal to implement any blanket ban that might be proposed in Europe for eel fishing. How do you plan, with your ministerial colleague in DARD in particular, to improve the stock of Lough Neagh, given the reports about the state of the lough?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of the Member's heritage and her interest in the lough. We continue to meet representatives of the Lough Neagh fisheries. We are talking about Lough Neagh pollan and looking at tourism opportunities with the waterways, and there is a DARD proposal to bring the entire lough into public ownership. My fisheries division and I met fisheries representatives and other anglers on the lough to try to ensure that we do not lose sight of who they are and that we recognise that it is their livelihood. Not only is it their livelihood, but it was their forefathers' livelihood, and it will be their children's and grandchildren's livelihood. I have a responsibility, along with Executive colleagues, to protect and enhance that.

Mr Elliott: The Minister said that she does not want eel fishermen in Lough Neagh to be disadvantaged. Does she accept that the eel fishermen in Lough Erne who have had their licence withdrawn are being disadvantaged, particularly when it has also been handed down from generation to generation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I met the eel fishermen of Lough Erne, and, unlike Lough Neagh, Lough Erne does not have an eel management plan. I have requested a meeting with the ESB about the hydro-station. I will continue to meet them. I plan to be in Fermanagh soon, with my colleague Seán Lynch. The people from the eel fishery are certainly on the list, if not for that

visit then for future visits. You are comparing apples with spuds here, Tom, and you know it. The eel management plan is the future of any fishing on any lake or waterway. It is not that the Lough Neagh fishermen are protected and those on Lough Erne are not; it is all down to the eel management plan. The stocks were not there for an eel management plan, due to circumstances beyond the control of the fishermen. I understand that.

Arts: East Belfast

7. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how emerging arts groups in East Belfast can access departmental funding when the majority of existing funding is allocated to established organisations in other areas of Belfast. (AQO 3975/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Arts organisations in east Belfast can apply to the Arts Council's project funding, small grants funding and the reimagining, arts and older people, intercultural and support for individual artists programmes. Those grant programmes run throughout the year and are open to new, emerging or existing organisations. The Arts Council requires organisations to have received funding through the programmes mentioned above before they can apply to its annual funding programme. In addition, for community festivals, groups can also avail themselves of the community festivals fund.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for that response. In east Belfast, there are a lot of fledgling arts groups, so would the Minister be prepared to support some sort of development of a strategic plan?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly would. I just want to put it on record that I visited east Belfast recently and was very warmly received. I had the privilege of going to the Strand theatre to see probably one of east Belfast's best known sons, Van Morrison. He did not say a lot, but he sang very well. A lot of arts groups in east Belfast have an impression that they are somewhat beyond the pale. I want to make sure, first, that that perception is diminished and, secondly, that we support local arts groups, artists and individuals. So I am happy to accept an invitation, if that is what the Member is suggesting, to meet some of those groups and individuals.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister detail what work she is doing, possibly with Belfast City Council and others specifically engaged in the issue, to ensure that existing and established groups do

not enjoy anything approaching a monopoly over arts funding, perhaps at the expense of new and emerging groups?

Ms Ní Chuilín: A consultation with the Arts Council is under way. I do not know whether the Member is aware of it, but the Arts Council is developing a five-year strategy for the arts. Part of the consultation on that is about including groups that feel for some reason or other that they have been overlooked. In the consultation, there is, I believe, a place for arts in the community and voluntary sector; it should not be seen as arts for the elite. There are opportunities through the consultation to change current policy, and I look forward to receiving, through the Arts Council, a lot of feedback from that. With Belfast City Council and other local government, I am very keen to ensure that people do not access funding for arts or any other services from DCAL by postcode. That is the last thing that I want.

Mr Lyttle: I add my congratulations to Glentoran Football Club, which is based in east Belfast, and to Belfast Trojans, an American football club based in east Belfast that has been ranked in the top 30 American football teams in Europe. I thank the Minister for her support of the Strand Arts Centre, as she mentioned in her answer. Is she familiar with the work that Prime Cut Productions has done in east Belfast to include community groups, such as Knocknagoney community group and Dee Street community group, in a theatre production in Templemore Avenue baths? If not, would she be willing to learn more about that community arts production?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly would. I met the Trojans. They are a great bunch of lads, but I am tempted to ask this question: if they are number 30, how many are on the list? I hope that there are not 31 teams and that they are fairly well up the list.

I am very keen to visit groups and have done so. I assume that this is an invitation to meet groups. Prime Cut Productions and other local producers have had excellent relationships with local communities. Such relationships are really important in inspiring young people to get involved not just in television and film production but in many other aspects of the arts, particularly through the creative industries. It is not an either/or situation; it is not a question of television or film. I am happy that they are working with groups, particularly in the Newtownards Road and Templemore Avenue area.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I know that the question relates to east Belfast, but will the Minister tell us who determines how funding for the arts in the North is allocated?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the 1995 order, it is the Arts Council. However, what is crucial is that, unlike sport, which has the 10-year Sport Matters strategy, the current policy for arts is going through a consultation process. DCAL gives money to the Arts Council to provide to the arts in the arts sector, but what we really should do is fund a policy that the Arts Council and others can deliver on our behalf. It is critical that we get a policy that everybody can see themselves in, not just the few.

Events in 2013

8. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what co-ordination has taken place between the organisers of the UK City of Culture 2013, the West Belfast Festival/Féile an Phobail, the World Police and Fire Games 2013 and other events this year to maximise the opportunities afforded by these events. (AQO 3976/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There has been ongoing liaison between organisations. For example, the director of Féile an Phobail and Féile 25 attended a meeting of the World Police and Fire Games board to give an extensive presentation highlighting the potential of co-operation. Indeed, World Police and Fire Games staff have attended several City of Culture events promoting the games and will continue to do so. Just last week, they were back in Derry again.

There is a great opportunity for the World Police and Fire Games to learn from Derry's City of Culture year in respect of the range of activities and its promotional aspects.

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Member to ask a very short supplementary question.

3.30 pm

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. We saw with an excellent sporting event how the legacy was protected. How will you ensure that all these events have a legacy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We were in Lisburn with Seb Coe today to look at the legacy of the Olympics and Paralympics. Unless you build in a legacy, it will just go over the heads of the people who live in the Bogside and Creggan in Derry. I

want to make sure that, by 1 January 2014, people know what DCAL and the rest of the Executive did and that the legacy goes well beyond the City of Culture year and well beyond 2014.

Education

Dundonald High School

1. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future of Dundonald High School. (AQO 3983/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Development proposal number 236, which proposes the closure of Dundonald High School, was published by the South Eastern Education and Library Board on 16 April 2013. The statutory two-month consultation period will run until 16 June. That provides the opportunity for anyone who wishes to express an opinion on the proposal to do so directly to my Department. Once the consultation has ended and I have considered the factors involved and comments received, I will make my decision based on what I believe is in the best educational interests of the pupils.

Given my role as decision-maker, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage. However, as part of the development proposal, I have agreed to visit the school to meet the working group and pupils and hear their views.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Mr Copeland: I listened to what the Minister said and understand that his room for comment may be somewhat limited. However, will he assure the House that a final decision on Dundonald High School has not been taken? In other words, if the school can prove that it has the support of the community and, perhaps more importantly, that it can achieve results that are satisfactory, is there any chance that it can stay open with the support of his Department?

Mr O'Dowd: I absolutely assure the Member and, indeed, the community served by the school that no decision has been made. A development proposal has been published, and we are going through that process. I will not make any decision until the consultation process has closed and I have met the school and particularly the pupils in that community.

Mr Newton: The Minister is on record as acknowledging the problems of

underachievement, particularly in working-class Protestant areas. Dundonald High School is in such an area. Will the Minister consider all the plans that the school brings forward and give an assurance that closure, which is the theme of the consultation, is not the only option?

Mr O'Dowd: I assure the Member that I will listen to and read carefully the proposals brought forward by the school and the community around it. The debate on education in South Belfast, which will continue after Question Time, included educational underachievement. The Member will be only too acutely aware that there are no quick fixes for any of these matters. Schools have to play a central role, as do the communities. We have to equip the communities around these schools to enable them to tackle educational underachievement. I assure the Member that, before I take any decisions, I will take into consideration any proposals that are imaginative, address the needs of the community served by the school and are serious about tackling educational underachievement.

Mr Lyttle: I seek the assurances of the Minister that he will take into account the high volume of special educational needs that pertain at the school and the response that the school provides to those.

Mr O'Dowd: That will form part of my decision-making process. In the broader context, Members should also be aware that there are many, many schools out there that serve socially deprived communities and achieve excellent educational results in the round. We should not accept social disadvantage as a reason for educational disadvantage. It can be, and is being tackled, by many schools in our society. I will deliberate carefully on the proposals coming forward from Dundonald High School and on whether it has a plan to tackle educational underachievement in that community.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I understand that the Minister's ability to answer some of these questions may be limited because of his role in the process. However, can he comment on the educational attainment of Dundonald High School and how that will be factored into any decision on the proposal?

Mr O'Dowd: In relation to educational attainment at the school, it has been identified through the inspection process as offering less than satisfactory provision for pupils. It is being

supported through the formal intervention process. Dundonald High School is one of only 12 post-primaries in formal intervention, and it is the only school to have entered the process twice. That tells the story of Dundonald High School today.

The advocates of the school, the elected representatives in the area and the school itself tell me that they have plans to move forward from that position. That position is not satisfactory, and the school accepts that. If it has plans that can bring us beyond that point, they deserve careful consideration.

Woodlands Language Unit

2. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Education when he will make a decision on the Western Education and Library Board's proposal to relocate the Woodlands Language Unit. (AQO 3984/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The four development proposals relating to the Woodlands speech and language unit were published on 22 January, and the statutory two-month period during which comments could be sent to me directly ended on 22 March. I also visited the unit during that period.

This is a complex matter, and it is important for me to take time to consider in detail all the information I have received. My decision will centre on the best interests of the children involved, as it is crucial to get the provision right for these educationally vulnerable children. I am, therefore, not yet in a position to announce my decision and can make no further comment on the Woodlands proposals at this time. I assure the Member that I will not unduly delay any decision on the proposals but I must ensure that they are comprehensively assessed and that all pertinent issues are considered.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer and acknowledge the fact that he visited the Woodlands unit and hosted a meeting in the Assembly with the Foyle MLAs. Will he ensure that the consultation process, and his decision-making process, are informed by the fact that the children have always received first-class education provision at the Woodlands unit?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhairle as a cheist. I thank the Member for the question. Yes, I can assure him that any decision I make will be centred on the quality of

education available to the young people in the unit. I visited the unit and was very impressed by the pupils and the staff and the board of governors' presentation to me. I have since had a delegation from the Foyle MLAs, who have all, as a group or individually, lobbied to maintain the unit. I recently had a visit from MLAs and parents and teachers from the school.

It is a quite complicated proposal, as there are four different development proposals affected by it, which have to be given careful consideration. There is the legislative basis upon which the proposals were brought forward, which I also have to give careful consideration to, but I hope to be in a position very soon to make an announcement.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. I was hoping he was going to come with a bit of good news for the MLAs who have been lobbying him. Will he sincerely reflect upon the testimony of the parents who attended the meeting and upon the opinion of the specialists in the area from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, who are saying fundamentally that the unit is a model of good practice and excellence?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. Of course I will reflect carefully on the testimony of those parents we have met who, along with yourself and the other MLAs, were part of the delegation and those who were there the day I was at the unit.

I have to take a number of factors into consideration, and that is why there has been a slight delay. I have to balance the legislation against what is currently happening on that site. What is happening on that site is good education, and the young people and their families are benefiting, which, at the end of the day, is the bottom line, but I have to be assured that, if I make a decision to retain the unit, I am not in direct conflict with any legislation and that at some stage down the road, we do not run into more difficulties. There was a famous quote about law, which I cannot repeat in the Chamber. Sometimes you run into that scenario. I have to ensure that we do not run into unnecessary court cases at a later date, but I am taking all matters into consideration.

Mr Storey: In considering the situation at Woodlands, the Minister made reference to equality of education. Will he also ensure equality of employment when it comes to the way in which those teachers who will be required to work in other sectors are treated so

that they do not end up on the dole in two years' time as a result of the discriminatory practices of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools?

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I remind Members that, as far as possible, the question must relate to the question that is on the Order Paper.

Educational Underattainment

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Education to outline any additional initiatives to address the high levels of educational underattainment in working-class communities. (AQO 3985/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have earmarked £2 million to be spent in each of the next two years on a new community education initiative to address specifically the high levels of educational underachievement in working-class communities. The programme will join up community-based and school activity in a coherent way. It will promote partnership of voluntary and community organisations and schools to provide educationally focused programmes in communities with particular concentrations of educational disadvantage.

The projects that will be delivered will include initiatives such as high-quality educational after-school programmes, parent education programmes, and GCSE Easter schools and summer schools to support the transition of pupils from primary to post-primary school. My focus is to provide coherent, sustained and effective evidence-based interventions that break the cycle of deprivation and educational underachievement in some working-class communities. High-quality teaching and learning are at the core of tackling educational underachievement, and I have a suite of policies in place to raise standards and tackle educational underachievement in all our schools. However, children's educational performance cannot be divorced from other aspects of their development and what happens to their families and communities. That is why I have brought forward a programme that will share expertise and skills across sectors and organisations to address the learning needs of the children, young people and their families.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I welcome the initiative. Could the Minister tell us how he intends to target the investment to ensure that it benefits those who are in greatest need?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I have been in discussions with the Minister for Social Development, and my officials have been in discussions with the Department for Social Development, about the best way of delivering the finance on the ground in partnership with other delivery bodies. One area that we are keen to explore is the neighbourhood renewal partnerships, which are working in socially disadvantaged communities and putting money on the ground in that way. We are also looking at other community initiatives, particularly with small pockets of social deprivation that might not fall into neighbourhood renewal projects. Sometimes, those may fall particularly in Protestant working-class loyalist communities, and I want to ensure that a focus is placed on funding being delivered on the ground there as well. Those discussions are ongoing. However, I am keen to get the money out the door and spent, and I think that, rather than reinventing the wheel, the delivery mechanisms that are in place are the best way to do that.

Mr Campbell: All four of my children came from a working-class home in a terraced house and went to a grammar school. Can the Minister ensure that the £2 million that he mentioned each year will narrow the gap and widen the availability of grammar school places so that other working-class children, like thousands before them, can get access to grammar schools rather than pursuing an ideological hatred of the same?

Mr O'Dowd: I learned a long time ago that hatred is a wasted energy. The Member might want to think about and contemplate that. It is a wasted energy, and it corrupts your mindset and thinking. I also suggest that the Member looks at exactly what is happening in education now, because, with the talk about grammar schools and non-grammar schools, the lines are becoming so blurred that they are almost unrecognisable. You do not have to go to grammar school to go to university. You do not have to go to grammar school to have an academic career, and, indeed, through the entitlement framework, many of our young people going through our grammar schools are now following vocational courses. So, I suggest that the Member does a wee bit more research into the current state of our education system.

I do not know the ages of the Member's children, and I will not nose into his personal business, but the education system has changed over the past five or 10 years, and it will change again in the next couple of years because of the implementation of the entitlement framework. Will working-class

children benefit from the changes that I have introduced? Yes. Did the previous system benefit working-class communities? Three or four decades ago, that argument might have stood up, but all the independent evidence now says that it does not. I assure the Member that I have no hatred for any sector of our education system. However, if he is going to accuse me of ideological warfare on those groups, will he accuse the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, our local Human Rights Commission, the National Association of Head Teachers, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Ulster Teachers' Union and the Catholic bishops of the same? I just named a few bodies, and they are all opposed to academic selection. It is not just a Sinn Féin rant. Sinn Féin has its opinion on these matters, based on the evidence that has been presented to it, but many other highly respected international organisations share the same view.

3.45 pm

Academic selection is the wrong way forward. It benefited the Member's children, and I am glad about that, but it is not benefiting all children, and that is the problem with it.

Mr Dallat: Last Friday, I witnessed many people learning to read and write for the first time and others achieving outstanding results. They were not in a grammar school or a secondary school; they were in Magilligan jail. Will the Minister tell the House when that will stop and when people will not have to go to jail to learn to write their own name?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member is right. The people who go through our jail system will, most likely, have come from a socially disadvantaged background, and a high percentage of them will have mental health problems. If society continues to make the same mistakes as it did previously, those people will continue to go through our jail system.

My ministerial predecessors and I have brought forward policies that are beginning to make change in society. Our results are rising and our primary schools are world leaders, and all of that has happened under my tenure and that of my two predecessors.

We are beginning to make changes. There are no quick-fix solutions to any of these matters, but the behaviour of the Members opposite, who refuse even to debate or discuss the issue of academic selection without trading insults

and smart comments or giggling among themselves, will not benefit anyone.

Mr Campbell may be interested in another lesson that I learned very early in life, which is that you should never believe your own propaganda. *[Interruption.]* The Members opposite have bought it hook, line and sinker and, I am told, refuse even to debate the matter internally.

Mr Agnew: In an age in which we have school league tables and schools are continually judged on how their highest achievers perform, how can we get a better assessment of schools located in areas that have had generational underachievement in order to show the journey on which they take children? For example, where a school is not getting high GCSE results or high academic selection results, from the former 11-plus, and so on, how will its work in bringing children along their journey be recognised?

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not publish league tables, and it will not do so at all. Some of our local newspapers publish league tables. That is a matter for them to defend; it is not for me to defend. I do not think that league tables add any value whatsoever to the education debate.

Our Education and Training Inspectorate measures educational attainment by going into schools to look at a whole range of issues that affects a young person's learning, and it judges a school's capabilities in that context.

I will go back to the point that I made in answer to a previous question: there are schools serving socially deprived communities that are achieving excellent results for all their young people and are adding value to those young people. Social disadvantage is a cause of educational underachievement. We should not accept it as a predetermined outcome for anyone who lives in a socially deprived area, nor should we allow any of our schools to do the same.

There are ways around it and ways to do it. I accept that some of it comes down to resources, but not all of it does. It comes down to practices and methodology in the school, and the determination of the school to break the link. It is also about the determination of the community that surrounds the school, including the parents, the board of governors and the elected representatives, to break the link. There are different ways of measuring educational attainment, but I do not measure it with league tables.

Schools: Common Funding Scheme

4. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Education what action his Department has taken to implement the recommendations of the review of the common funding scheme for schools. (AQO 3986/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Fundamental change is needed in the way in which delegated budgets are allocated to schools here. I am considering very carefully the recommendations made by the independent panel in that context. The Member will know that the panel also identified a compelling case for change and improvement.

The outcome of that independent review will not be about tinkering at the edges. Reform of the way in which school budgets are determined is needed if we are to support the effective delivery of the curriculum in sustainable schools that put pupils first and that serve, and are supported by, communities that value education.

In the coming weeks, I will make a statement to the Assembly that will set out my response to the report and my proposals for the reform of the common funding scheme.

This will be followed by a full consultation with key stakeholders, including schools. My decisions will be informed by the views of the Education Committee, which have recently been provided to my Department.

Mr Ross: I welcome the fact that the Minister will bring those forward in the next number of weeks. Will he be bringing forward anything specifically to give schools more autonomy over their own finances?

Mr O'Dowd: In the common funding formula review, there is a proposal on autonomy of finances, which I am studying very carefully. When I make my announcement in June, I will set out very carefully my considered response to all the recommendations in the common funding formula review. Changes will be made to the common funding formula, and I want to see those in place from 2014-15 onwards. One way in which we can tackle educational disadvantage and support the working class, as was commented on earlier, is to ensure that funding goes to the schools that are dealing with the biggest difficulties in delivering good education.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire.

Can the Minister give an assurance that the outworking of the review will ensure that strategically important small schools will be sufficiently funded?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question. Yes, there are strategically small schools that we need to retain to ensure that educational attainment can be achieved for either isolated rural communities or, in some instances, where there are isolated communities in a broader community. I will ensure that, when I am bringing forward the formula, we protect those schools.

Area planning is another matter that is looking at the small-schools estate, and I have said that there will always be a need for small, strategically placed rural schools in particular, as well as schools serving isolated communities in a broader majority community. I am keen to support those two factors.

Mr Rogers: Considering the importance of primary-school education, Minister, have you any plans to increase the age-weighted pupil unit in primary schools so that the ratio of primary to post-primary compares favourably with England?

Mr O'Dowd: Comparing our funding system with that of England is comparing apples with oranges. They do not automatically match across or read across. You can interpret them to suit whichever argument you bring forward. Through the years, there has been a lobby that primary schools are insufficiently funded. I am of the view that our education system in its totality is insufficiently funded and that it requires more funding. However, if I were to change the age-weighted pupil unit to favour primary schools more, that money would have to come from somewhere. It would come out of the system, either from post-primary, nursery or elsewhere. The Salisbury report touches on this issue. I will consider the recommendation very carefully before I make a final decision.

It is worth noting that somewhere in the region of £43 million is being held in surplus by schools. Much of that is being held by schools for valid reasons as they plan into the future. Some schools say to me that it is for a rainy day, and I reply that it is actually raining and that they need to start dealing with the surplus. The majority of the surplus is held in the primary school sector, so a significant surplus of funds is being held in the primary school sector. Each school will have a justifiable argument for holding it, but, as we move

forward with more stringent and tightened budgets, we have to ensure that every penny is being spent wisely. If large reserves are being held, they now need to be brought into action and spending has to start, with the money going back into the education system, instead of being held in reserve.

Mr Cree: The review calls for the introduction of the equivalent to a pupil bonus scheme, which my party called for at its conference last year. Can the Minister detail whether any work has been commissioned in his Department with a view to taking this forward?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member checks the terms of reference, he will see that one of the reasons why the review was brought forward was to ensure that our policies are in line with our budgets and our financing mechanisms. One of the key areas that we wanted to tackle was social disadvantage. That was a key part of the terms of reference for the Salisbury review. The recommendation has come forward that there should be a weighted contribution towards children from socially deprived backgrounds. Again, I will take that on board along with all the other recommendations. I am of the firm view that if we are to tackle educational disadvantage, we have to equip schools that are dealing with socially disadvantaged young people with the finances to do so. Bob Salisbury has given us a formula to do that.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Education Bill

6. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education whether the amendments to resolve the contradictions between the Education Bill and the heads of agreement will be brought forward urgently to allow the Education Bill to proceed. (AQO 3988/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Bill will deliver the policy commitments in the heads of agreement. In relation to employment, for example, the Bill will establish the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) as the employer of staff in grant-aided schools. It will also provide for boards of governors to take all employment decisions in their schools if they wish. I have considered the Education Committee's report on the Bill and the views expressed by stakeholders. I intend to bring suggested amendments to the Executive for consideration in the very near future.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his answer and his previous answers on this subject, whereby he has consistently confirmed that there are no contradictions. However, the two documents say opposite things. Does the Minister expect the outcome of this discussion to be that grammar schools will continue to be allowed to be their own employers without reference to ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I do not expect that outcome. I expect the discussions and further stages of the Education Bill to be the outcome of the heads of agreement. In fairness, the Bill does not say the opposite of what is contained in the heads of agreement because those heads of agreement have been transplanted into the Bill. The view has been expressed that the clause, as drafted, is unworkable. If someone were to come forward with a more workable draft or one that they believe brings forward the heads of agreement, I would be happy to explore it further. However, many times, the concern has been expressed to me by employees of the schools estate that they want to be treated in a manner that is fair and equal to all other employees in the school system. The only way to achieve that is to ensure that there is a single employing authority and that powers are delegated to boards of governors.

I have used the following reference previously. Members will remember that, when the institutions were brought back together in 2007, one of the first industrial actions that we faced was from classroom assistants who wanted a fair and equitable pay deal. That was settled; all Members supported that. However, it is not settled yet in the grammar sector, which is not acceptable. As far as I am concerned, if you work in education and you are paid for it through the public purse, you should have the same terms and conditions as everyone else. That is what I strive to achieve.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht a chuid freagraí go dtí an pointe seo. How will the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority assist in improving educational attainment across the various sectors?

Mr O'Dowd: The main objective of bringing ESA forward was to ensure that educational achievement and attainment was its main drive and agenda item. It was not about saving money, although I now have to save £20 million a year out of my budget to meet the budget commitments for ESA. The main focus of the body is to ensure that educational achievement

is the main agenda and that it is driven forward. How will that be done? We will have all the bodies around the table in a strategic body. They will not simply look after their own sectors but the well-being of all children in our education system, learning from best practice and international best practice and ensuring that our limited resources are directed into schools rather than towards administration.

Mr Kinahan: Like many Members, I am now completely confused about the heads of agreement. Does the Minister feel that the heads of agreement are workable? Are they being, or have they been, rewritten?

Mr O'Dowd: Your state of confusion never ceases to amaze me, but I do not think that you are as confused as you let on. You are opposed to ESA. As a political manoeuvre, your party has decided to oppose ESA, not because it does not believe it to be the best way forward for education but because it believes that it can use it as a wee battering ram against the DUP. Your decision is political, so the education arguments that I am putting forward will not make sense to you. I am not answering the question that you want to be answered. You are asking a political question about your party's political programme to oppose the DUP on ESA and to act up to the grammar sector that you are more pro-grammar than the DUP. Do you know who loses? The controlled sector loses out. That sector was mentioned only twice in the eight-hour debate about ESA when it was first brought to the House. It was mentioned once by the Chair of the Education Committee and again by the Education Minister. They were the only people who mentioned Protestant working-class communities in the eight-hour debate on ESA that was held in the Chamber. If you want to out-grammar the DUP, you tear on. I will tell you who will be left behind: it will be the ordinary working-class Protestant communities and the controlled sector because, without ESA, there will not be a controlled sector support body. The Member clearly shows his confusion again. He wants to know whether the heads of agreement are being redrafted or rewritten. He will find that they were brought forward by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I have no indication that they are being rewritten or that there is any wish to rewrite them. Are they workable? Of course they are workable if people want to work them, and that is the key to it all.

4.00 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease while we prepare to move to the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Primary Schools: Inner South Belfast

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the need to address underachievement in Protestant working-class areas; acknowledges the vital role of primary school in a child's early education; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward plans for a new primary school for inner south Belfast as a matter of urgency. — [Mr Spratt.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "address" and insert

"educational underachievement in all working-class communities; acknowledges the vital role of primary school in a child's education; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Belfast Education and Library Board to bring forward plans for a new primary school for inner south Belfast as a matter of urgency." — [Mr Hazzard.]

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you for your indulgence in this matter. Briefly, I support the motion and the amendment and commend the proposers of both. As a South Belfast representative, I fully endorse the sentiment behind the motion and the local context in which it is set. I also endorse the general principle of the amendment, which is the need to ensure that all children are served equally, particularly those from a working-class background who have not been served as well as they might have been. I know from my years of experience working directly with people in the Village, Donegall Pass and Sandy Row that great efforts were made by parents, boards of governors and others in the education authorities to try to resolve the issue of a school for inner south Belfast to service that community.

Michael McGimpsey referred to the broader regeneration of the area, and it is important to look at that in a holistic way. Education will help significantly to secure the future of younger people in that community and, therefore, its future families. Therefore, it is important to resolve the issues to ensure that we get a school that combines three schools that are not

achieving as well as they might. Again, I thank those who proposed the motion and the amendment. I reiterate my firm support, as a South Belfast representative, for the three schools to be merged and a replacement school provided as soon as possible.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim an-fháilte roimh dhíospóireacht an lae inniu, mar ligfidh sí domh m'fhís agus mo chuid iarrachtaí a leagan amach le feabhas a chur ar an chóras oideachais anseo chun tairbhe na bpáistí go léir. I very much welcome today's debate as it allows me to set out my vision, outline my efforts to improve the education system here for the benefit of all children and address education issues in South Belfast.

The motion highlights underachievement in Protestant working-class communities, which is a fair and valid point. However, I welcome the fact that the proposers of the motion have accepted the amendment because it, I believe, allows for the full story to be told. Members may be interested to know that, in percentage terms, Protestants achieve less well than Catholics, but a higher number of young Catholics leave school without five or more good GCSEs, including English and maths. Between 2010 and 2011, the percentage of Protestant male school leavers on free school meal entitlement who achieved five or more GCSEs or equivalent, including in English and maths, fell by 1.7 percentage points from 20.3 to 18.6. By contrast, the proportion of young Catholic boys entitled to free school meals who did not achieve that level was double that of their Protestant counterparts — 888 compared with 450.

The debate on education here has moved forward. We are all now acutely aware that working-class educational underachievement is the most significant issue facing not only our education system but our society as a whole. Division by class is real and cannot, should not and will not be ignored. As an Assembly, we recognise that there is a pressing need to ensure equality in educational achievement. Closing the gap between those who are least disadvantaged and those who are most disadvantaged is vital for individuals, the economy and society. Breaking the cycle of social disadvantage, educational failure and restricted life chances is a fundamental challenge, but let me be clear: there are no quick fixes.

Mr McDonnell called for a special education task force to tackle educational underachievement and asked for me to take on

board that consideration. I view the Department of Education as a special education task force to tackle educational underachievement. At the heart of every policy that I bring forward is how we break the link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement. I will reiterate, however, that high-quality teaching and learning in our schools, supported by strong leadership, community engagement and a focus on pupil needs is at the very heart of tackling social disadvantage and educational underachievement.

The role of additional initiatives and programmes must be to support and reinforce excellence in the classroom, not compensate for any poor practice. I am confident that I have in place a set of coherent policies, based on best practice and designed to raise standards and to improve the quality of teaching and learning in all our schools.

The introduction of the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework has been supported by a robust school improvement policy. That policy includes a formal intervention process, which provides vigorous intervention and support when a school is found to offer less than satisfactory provision. These policies and programmes are working. They are realising improvements for all our young people. International evidence shows, through PIRLS and TIMSS, that our primary-school pupils are performing significantly above the international average in literacy and numeracy.

Just as importantly, the surveys found that the relationship between socio-economic background and performance was weaker in our primary schools than in most other countries. We must be encouraged by that, not only because of overall achievement, but in regard to breaking the cycle of educational underachievement. However, let me be frank: international evidence is clear that education systems with schools that are socially segregated magnify pre-existing differences. Research has consistently found that high concentrations of disadvantage, seen in many non-selective schools here, produce lower outcomes for pupils.

Mr Hazzard referred to academic selection, and other Members suggested that he had gone off track, and it had nothing to do with the motion; it has everything to do with the motion. The continued use of academic selection by grammar schools to gain entry is a major barrier to addressing underachievement in disadvantaged communities. Unionist politicians and others must ask themselves why

our children do not perform as well internationally at 15 as they do at 10. In conjunction with excellence in teaching and learning, I also firmly believe that it is important to address underachievement through additional funding to support targeted initiatives to raise the aspirations and achievement of all our pupils. Additional funding that is well targeted and well spent can make a real difference to vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils. Consequently, I have put in place a number of effective evidence-based interventions to help tackle the cycle of deprivation and underachievement. For instance, the Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry Bright Futures programmes are long-term, sustained programmes that are embedding the features of best practice in targeting underachievement. The Sure Start and extended schools programmes also serve areas of greatest social disadvantage. The Full Service programmes have been piloted in north and west Belfast. The £12 million Delivering Social Change literacy and numeracy signature project will provide additional support for children at risk of underachievement. In conjunction, I recently announced an additional £1 million to be spent on literacy and numeracy projects in each of the next two years.

I am not satisfied that the current funding formula for schools targets sufficient resources to address social deprivation, as was outlined during Question Time. Therefore, I commissioned the Salisbury review, which recommended significantly increased levels of formula funding for pupils from deprived backgrounds through the introduction of a pupil premium. That review will inform detailed recommendations for a revised scheme, which, as I said, I intend to bring forward in the near future. I want to make sure that funding is directed to those pupils most in need.

Mr Spratt quite rightly referred to the role of families, parents and guardians in the educational achievement of young people. I think that we all realise that children's educational performance cannot be divorced from other aspects of their development and what happens to their families and communities. We need to raise parental aspirations and the value of education within our communities.

That is why I launched the Education Works advertising campaign in September 2012. The campaign is designed to inform and engage all parents, but particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. We will need to develop a range of interventions to integrate different services, align them, work with the

schools and help schools to reach into their communities.

We must share expertise across sectors and organisations to address the learning needs of children and young people, and their families. To kick-start that type of approach, I have earmarked £2 million to be spent in the next two years on a new community education programme. The programme will join up community-based and school activity in a coherent way. It will promote partnerships of voluntary and community organisations and schools to provide educationally focused programmes in communities, with particular concentration on educational disadvantage.

I hope to be able to provide funding through target projects within the designated neighbourhood renewal areas. I also intend to target other, predominantly Protestant, working-class areas that have very low educational outcomes. It is my profound hope that this innovative programme will begin to address the problems of persistent underachievement and disengagement. Strong, viable and sustainable schools are another essential element for delivering high-quality education, raising standards and tackling educational underachievement.

Turning to the second part of the motion: the amalgamation of three schools in inner south Belfast, particularly the creation of a new amalgamated school, has been raised frequently with me by MLAs and others. I commend the community for its willingness to embrace change to tackle educational underachievement. I also welcome this opportunity to debate the issues involved and to set out my Department's — and my own — roles and responsibilities.

Members will be acutely aware that the management of the controlled school estate in Belfast lies with the Belfast Education and Library Board, not with my Department. The Belfast Board published a draft area plan for primary provision that proposes an amalgamation on a new site in the grounds of the City Hospital.

My Department and I understand that the health trust has not declared the site surplus to requirements. That requires further discussions between the Belfast Board and Minister Poots, all of which I am happy to involve myself with. On listening to Members, I understand the frustration of the community that they are echoing on this matter. This proposal has been discussed for a very long time, and perhaps

there has been more discussion than action. I want to see action instead of further discussion.

Several weeks ago, I met the chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board to discuss a range of issues. One was the amalgamation of the three schools, how that proposal could be brought forward and how we could move on to the Belfast City Hospital site. I am confident that the board is proactively investigating the matter, and that all actions that can be taken to bring that forward are being taken.

In principle, I am very supportive of this proposal. It ticks all the boxes as far as I am concerned. I have to be careful because, at the end of the day, I will have to sign off on three development proposals, which will have to be carried on their own merits in an amalgamation. I then have to move forward with a proposal from the Belfast Board for a newbuild on the site. I would like that to be the Belfast City Hospital site.

I have a copy of Mr McGimpsey's letter from Minister Poots, which he kindly forwarded to me after the first part of the debate. I will personally follow that up with Minister Poots, because we require clarity on exactly what the status of the hospital site is. If the hospital site can be made surplus to requirements by the Department of Health, I assure Members that the Belfast Board, the Minister and the Department will be proactive in trying to ensure that it comes under our governorship, and then we will move forward to the next stage of building a new school in the south Belfast area for those communities that have been working towards this proposal and want to see it brought to fruition.

4.15 pm

School amalgamations, school closures and new developments all bring their own different elements and nuances when they are being brought forward. This issue has been overly complicated at times. It requires a dedicated focus from the board, which I think is now in place. I assure Members that I will continue to have a focus on the matter and that I will engage personally with Minister Poots to see how we can move the land issue forward for the betterment of the community.

Sometimes bureaucracy can get in the way of sensible decisions, and that is no fault of those who work in it. There is always a rule book telling you why you should not do something or why you have to delay making a decision. I am in the frame of mind that we have to move

forward now and start delivering tangible services to communities, particularly socially deprived communities. Mr Spratt referred to my making a statement that we have to evidence real changes to these communities. Nothing evidences as proof of real change to a community and that those in power are interested in their well-being like a new school building. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The debate so far has been very agreeable, so at this stage, I do not intend to change the tenor of the discussion.

The motion has three separate parts: it deals with underachievement in working-class areas; it outlines the vital role of primary schools in the community; and it calls on the Minister to bring forward urgent plans for a new school.

I listened to Michael McGimpsey's vivid description of the three primary schools in the Village area: Donegall Road Primary School; Fane Street Primary School; and Blythefield Primary School. It is clear from his description that there is a need for at least one new school in that area. I think that that cannot be gainsaid. It is a fact that primary schools are the foundation stone for the future education and learning of our young people. If we fail them at primary level, what hope is there when they move into post-primary level? They are going to be continually playing catch-up and lagging behind.

We all know that there are numerous reasons for underachievement. Parental qualifications is one issue. Evidence shows that, in particular, if a mother has educational qualifications, that is a help to children in their education. The home learning environment is important. Are there books in the house? Are children being encouraged to read? We also know that poor teaching and poor leadership in schools also play a very important role. We know that those factors affect all communities.

When he was making a presentation to the Education Committee, Dr Pete Shirlow from Queen's advanced another reason, which I will read out:

"It is quite clear that de-industrialisation has had a major impact on the Protestant working-class community. That impact is very similar to that seen in working-class communities in the north of England, which experienced the associated sense of loss of status and significance, and a strong sense of alienation. That was very much a product of generation following generation into

established industries that have since gone. The difficulty in such communities is that, as economies turn more towards the service sector and the need for literacy and computer abilities, those communities are left with a redundant set of skills. That is not to undermine that there are also problems in republican and nationalist communities."

I know that Trevor dismissed that reason in his contribution, but I think that we have to be conscious of the intergenerational impact of some of these issues.

Be that as it may, the single biggest predictor of academic performance is socio-economic background. Social background is the single biggest factor impacting on educational attainment here. The evidence shows that disadvantage has a stronger impact than gender or religion. The disadvantaged do less well in the transfer tests, GCSEs and entering third-level education. The question is this: how do we reverse that trend? The Salisbury review on the common funding formula suggests increased funding to pupils from deprived backgrounds through a pupil premium. I know that the Minister has already mentioned that. We also need to raise parental aspirations. That has also been mentioned in the debate. All of us in the House need to assert the value of education, not only for all our children but for communities in general. All of us have a major part to play in that.

The third part of the motion calls on the Minister to bring forward urgent plans. I listened to what the Minister had to say, and I commend him for what he had to say. This is an area in which it certainly appears, on the face of it —

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

Mr Sheehan: — that we need cross-departmental co-operation. I am glad to hear the Minister say that he is prepared to do that, and I hope that the Minister of Health says the same.

Mr Storey: The Member who has just spoken said that he was glad that there had been a degree of unanimity on the issue. I think that the words that he used were that everybody had been in good temper when they had been making their contribution. We will bring that to an end very quickly before the end of the debate, because there are some things that need to be said.

First, I commend my colleague Mr Jimmy Spratt for bringing the motion to the House. I think that we all know that, over the past number of months, Jimmy has had particular challenges and difficulties in his personal health. We are glad that Jimmy is back with us and that he has continued to carry out his work. We are delighted that he is back with us in the Assembly.

He rightly highlighted a particular need in the motion, which I was very happy to be associated with when he tabled it. However, it is very sad that, despite the focus of the motion being on the need to move ahead and have a building provided for the schools mentioned, there are some who have unfortunately used this opportunity, yet again, to create an atmosphere that makes it very difficult for there to be an open discussion around the issues in education that need to be addressed. It took Mr Hazzard all of two minutes and 22 seconds to get to the point at which, yet again, we had the usual tirade of anti-grammar school rhetoric. The Member knows what I am going to say, and I have to say it: he is somebody who benefited from going to the Red High. It is insulting to those who gave him that education that we have to listen to that repeated tirade around an element of our education system. If the party opposite and those who have ideological hobby horses want to have equality —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr Wells: Does the Member accept that there is hypocrisy from not only Mr Hazzard but from the former Minister for Regional Development Mr Conor Murphy, who sent his daughter to a rather posh grammar school in Newry?

Mr Storey: I think that we could go through other Members. The Member for North Antrim Mr McKay also went to a grammar school. There are probably more. That was the choice that they made. That was the choice that their parents believed was appropriate for them. Therefore, every child should have that opportunity, and every child has that opportunity.

Mr Hazzard: They do not.

Mr Storey: They do. If the Member wants to make an intervention —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I draw Members back to the motion.

Mr Storey: I wish that, when they came to deal with the issue, Mr Deputy Speaker, other Members —

Mr Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Maskey: Can the Member explain something to me? I remember having a panel meeting in the Village area during one of the election campaigns. Parents there were, rightly, complaining about their children's underachievement in some schools. I pointed out that their children had to get a bus out of the area and pass a number of very well-known grammar schools, the front walls of which those children would never see the inside of. Can the Member explain to me how that is justifiable, because I cannot?

Mr Storey: We either have a system whereby we set a criterion for admissions to a school on the basis of free school meals, which is a social indicator, or one based on the ability of the child to access that education. The Member and his party want to have it both ways. They want to try to convince the world that, somehow, they are dismantling the class system. The Minister knows that he and I have had this discussion. When they get the children into those schools, what do they do? They set the children tests. Then, of course, what happens is that they dress it all up. They call it "banding" or "streaming". They have all sorts of technical phrases. However, what does that simply do? It determines the aptitude and ability of children and selects them to be in a class with a cohort of equals. Let us dispense with the social myth and nonsense that, somehow, you can socially engineer and, hopefully, at the end, everybody will be the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I draw the debate back to the subject of a new primary school for south Belfast?

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. If those who made their contributions earlier in the debate had kept on track, we would not have had to come to this tirade — terrain.

Mr Hazzard: It is not your first tirade.

Mr Storey: If it is what the Member wants, I am quite happy to call it a tirade as well.

The issue is where the focus needs to be in the debate. It is on the failure of successive Education and Health Ministers to deliver for

south Belfast. That is the reality. I welcome the fact that the Minister has come to the House today. Now, the situation is that he will have a discussion with the Health Minister, there will be all sorts of talks, and, all of a sudden, we will have progress. Let us look at the timeline that we have had in relation to south Belfast. Let us see the number of Members who, back in 2008, talked about the need for the new primary school in south Belfast. There was unanimity across the parties on the need for the three schools to be brought together. In December 2011, in another debate, the Minister informed Members that planning was at an early stage, although he said that he would like to see an amalgamation without a new school in the meantime. We have had all those discussions. We have had all of the meetings. Yet, today, the Minister still has to come to the House and say, "Well, I will tell you what we will have to do: I am quite happy to talk to Minister Poots and to have other discussions." Why are we still at a stage at which delay on delivery is the Department's stock-in-trade? I will give way to the Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: First, I also meant to say that I am more than happy to meet community representatives and the elected representatives for South Belfast to discuss the matter further. The Member has left one important element out of his timeline from 2008 to 2011. What about the Belfast Board? What about the then chief executive of the Belfast Board, who is currently employed by the Member opposite to advise him on education? Does the former chief executive of the Belfast Board have any questions to answer on why there is no new school in south Belfast?

Mr Storey: The Minister thinks that he is asking me an awkward question. I have no difficulty. If David Cargo, who is the person we are referring to, was responsible for the delay, he should take responsibility for that in the same way that anybody else should. I do not think that that was a smart or quick move on the part of the Minister.

Regardless of whoever was responsible for the delay in ensuring that a decision that had buy-in from the community and, we are told, from the board and the Health Department, and from everybody — it seems as though nobody in the House today was opposed to that process — the simple question that needs to be answered, and which has not been answered, is why we are still talking about something that everybody has agreed should have happened? That is the issue for people in south Belfast. They are really not worried about who delayed that or did

not do A, B or C: they want to know when it will happen.

That brings me to the issue of capital and whether a decision should be made on the delivery of this project. How many times have we come to the House and heard that there is to be another review of capital projects? We have had the compliant, the partially compliant and the non-compliant, and now the Minister has put another set of criteria on the website for determining whether a school moves forward. It changes more often than the Order Papers that come before the Assembly. Very few people in the system understand what the criteria are for determining whether a school will be built. All the principals of the schools affected by the motion want to be convinced that they will see progress. The Minister talks about bureaucracy being overcomplicated. Why has that been the case?

4.30 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Politicians.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister tell us who those politicians are?

Mr O'Dowd: We have to take into account that, every time a report comes out and politicians across these Benches demand that a new procedure be put in place and that services be ring-fenced and gold-plated, we put another layer of bureaucracy in the way of delivering public services. We have to be careful what we wish for. At times, we make regulations that actually delay the delivery of public services.

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

Mr Storey: The Minister did not answer the question. Is he saying, then, that we should oppose his regulations? Is he trying to tell us that he should have a free hand to be able to direct his finances in some socially engineered way —

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

Mr Storey: — that would further disadvantage working-class Protestant boys and girls in south Belfast?

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

Mr Storey: I think that the House has seen today that it is now time for action. We have had all the words. Let us have action and

delivery. I think that that is when the Minister and his party will prove whether they are up for delivering on this very issue.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the need to address educational underachievement in all working-class communities; acknowledges the vital role of primary school in a child's education; and calls on the Minister of Education and the Belfast Education and Library Board to bring forward plans for a new primary school for inner south Belfast as a matter of urgency.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while there is a change at the Table.

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

Paediatric Cardiac Surgery

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

Mr Swann: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the publication of the preferred option document by the paediatric congenital cardiac services working group and the related Children's Heartbeat Trust report; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reject the recommendation of a Dublin-only service for the future commissioning of regional paediatric cardiac surgery and interventional cardiology; and to select a model which retains primary provision and the ability to operate on emergency admissions in Belfast.

I start today by thanking the Business Committee for allowing today's debate to be changed. As stated in the draft Order Paper, the debate was to have been on the significant drop in farm incomes. Although that is an important issue, the Ulster Unionist Party replaced that motion with today's one on the

future of paediatric cardiac surgery in Belfast, following the Health and Social Care Board's recommendation to the Minister that Northern Ireland lose that capability and everything move to Dublin.

It is with regret that I have to move the motion.

It is regrettable that the recommendation to remove paediatric cardiac surgery was even considered, never mind recommended. I hope that the Minister makes it down to the Chamber before I finish my speech.

As I have done previously in the House, I declare an interest as the father of a three-month-old son awaiting cardiac surgery. I thank Members and staff of the Assembly who continue to ask how Evan is. I thank them for their stories and support, including Members who have lost a son or a daughter and the usher who has been where I am now. It is on such occasions that this place transcends party or tribal politics and becomes what it should be: a place that can make a difference to people's lives. We can become what we should be: politicians who do not just want to make a difference to people's lives but actually do make a difference.

I pay tribute to and thank every member of staff of the children's hospital, without whom Evan would not be with us today: the consultants, the surgeons, the doctors, the anaesthetists, the nurses, the PICU team and the auxiliaries. The removal of paediatric cardiac surgery would mean a deskilling of many of these professional groups. Evan went through what I am glad to say was a successful bowel operation on Thursday. If the PICU team or the anaesthetist had not had the necessary experience to operate on a child with a cardiac condition, we do not know whether that surgery could have been performed in Belfast, even though it was non-cardiac.

The Minister has received a recommendation from the Health and Social Care Board that would end paediatric cardiac surgery in Belfast, with everything moving to Dublin. Through the motion, I want to ensure that the Minister knows the feeling of every Member before he makes that final decision, which is his alone. I call on him to reject the recommendation of the board, accept the concerns listed in the minority report of the Children's Heartbeat Trust and retain paediatric cardiac surgery in Belfast, working in collaboration with Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Dublin, an option also noted in the document on the identification of a preferred option, which I read as meaning that the

Minister can make a difference here by doing what is right for Northern Ireland.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that all Members should, as we have, visit the mummies and daddies huddled around the cots of their infants at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children? If they did so, I do not think that they would be so quick to support moving the service out of Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her intervention. I also thank the Minister for taking the time last week to come to Clark clinic to visit the parents, children and clinicians there.

Evan William-Robert Swann was born on 8 February at 10.32 am. He was born with a congenital heart defect — one single wee soul who has already been through more than any parent would want their child to go through. He is just that: one soul. He is a son, a brother, a grandson, a nephew, a cousin and a great-grandson. So you can understand the frustration, anger and hurt when commissioners and John Compton use flippant lines such as "It is a numbers game" and "This affects only a small number of children across Northern Ireland". Liam Clifford has had two operations and one catheterisation. Lexie Callender has had two operations. Odhran Gallagher has had four operations and three catheterisations. Charlie McCombe has had four operations and one balloon septostomy. Riley Ann Moss has had four operations. Shay Smith has had two operations and two catheterisations, one planned and one emergency. Caiden Dalzell has had two operations. Katie O'Neill has had two operations. Nadine McGaffin has had two operations and three catheterisations. None of their parents sees them only as a number, and there are many, many more.

I labour the point on numbers because they are the sole premise on which the recommendation that Belfast has to close is based. Belfast does not reach the magic number of 450 surgeries that is dictated by the Safe and Sustainable review. These standards have not been endorsed by professional organisations such as the Royal College of Surgeons, the Paediatric Intensive Care Society and the British Congenital Cardiac Association. Minister, in your response, will you please clarify once and for all where that number came from? I have heard that it came from the recommendation of experts. How did they come up with that figure? Who were the initial experts? Only 15% of hospitals worldwide with paediatric cardiac services perform that number of surgeries, so are the other 85% unsafe? Have

you received evidence that, if that number is not achieved, children will die at surgeons' hands, or do you accept that Belfast is safe? Today, you should say to the House, as you have done before, that paediatric cardiac surgery in Belfast is safe and dispel the myth.

The board has accepted the Safe and Sustainable numbers for Belfast, and so the recommendation is to close it. Will the Minister inform the House whether he has had any conversation with his Scottish counterpart, who told the Safe and Sustainable review what it could do with its figures? Does he know why the Safe and Sustainable review recommended that it was OK for University Hospital Southampton and a hospital in Newcastle upon Tyne to stay open, both of which do fewer than 250 operations? Minister, if numbers are crucial, why are groups of children being sent elsewhere for surgery that they could safely receive in Belfast?

Independent external experts who recently reviewed the service concluded in all cases that there was not an undue safety issue. Despite that, the restrictions on the operations being performed in Belfast has not been removed. So, it is seen as part of a process of attrition aimed at running down the service to a point of no return, possibly the numbers game that was referred to earlier.

What a piece of propaganda the preferred options document put forward by the Health and Social Care Board is. Even its name shows that it is a document that has the sole raison d'être of removing children's heart surgery from Northern Ireland. This is not a preferred option. It is not the preferred option of the parents. It is not the preferred option of the trust. It is not the preferred option of the children. And it is not the preferred option of the vast majority of medical experts. Indeed, in the response to the public consultation, those currently practising in paediatrics, neonatology, paediatric cardiology and other fields stated that their preferred option was to retain provision in Belfast as part of an all-island network. A central point of having such a network is to ensure that emergency interventions, such as those that take place in Belfast, should continue. Removing those to Dublin will increase the likelihood of the death of a critically ill child. Those are the words of Dr Connor Mulholland FRCP FESC.

We were fortunate. We knew from a prenatal 22-week scan that Evan had a congenital heart defect and a number of other complications. From speaking to the families I have encountered who have children with a

congenital heart defect, I still maintain that we were fortunate. We knew and were able to plan. The prenatal and neonatal provisions of any Dublin-only option needs detailed review before the Minister accepts it. Evan was the example. He was due to be born on 18 February, and his delivery was planned for 11 February when all the professionals were in place. However, there is a wee thran thing in him, and he was born on 8 February at 10.32, 10 days early. All the professionals were on hand because he was born in Belfast.

I have studied the planned care pathway for Dublin-only, and it is full of potholes, to say the least. Mothers could be moved a week before delivery, but that would not have worked for us. I have heard recently of one hour 30 minutes from Belfast to Dublin being achieved. That is fantastic, but is it repeatable? Was it the fact that it was done at 10.00 pm on a Sunday with clear roads and everybody at hand? There was no congestion, and no waiting for the availability of surgeons or PICU beds.

"The safety of children and adults in Northern Ireland relies on continued congenital heart surgery at the Royal Victoria Hospital. I pledge to ensure that this world-class service continues and that children here can avail of the best surgical services in Belfast, Dublin and across centres in Britain. I will vote against any move to remove this surgery from Belfast"

Those are not just my words; they are the words of the Children's Heartbeat Trust pledge, which, to date, has been signed by 87 MLAs, including Ministers. That pledge is entwined in and substantive to the motion before us today. It is not up to me to remind other MLAs of their conscience or their individual pledges when they speak and eventually vote on the motion.

From my opening remarks, there are many more questions that still have to be answered. I believe that, until the Minister can answer all these questions to his satisfaction that the decision that he makes will not cause the loss of a single soul, he cannot accept the recommendation of the Health and Social Care Board to end paediatric cardiac surgery and interventional cardiology for the entire population of Northern Ireland and our children by removing it from Belfast.

4.45 pm

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a

LeasCheann Comhairle. I take the opportunity to commend Robin for getting this motion in front of the House. It is a very real and live issue. It is a live issue for you as a parent, for other parents and for the children.

Unfortunately, I only have five minutes, so I will try to cover stuff from the Committee's perspective and then go into some of my own comments.

It is a serious issue. It is something the Committee has looked at, and it will impact on many people. We as a Committee have followed the issue very closely over the last number of months. We visited the Clark clinic on two occasions, and Members will recall that the Health Committee initially brought a motion to the House on 25 September last year. It is an issue that we have been very active on.

At our meeting last Wednesday, we were briefed by the Department and the Health and Social Care Board on the current position. They explained the process that has been worked through to date. The working group assessed eight options against agreed criteria, and the option that it recommended to the board was that surgery should be commissioned primarily from Dublin. The board then approved that option at its meeting on 25 April and has submitted — *[Interruption.]* That is my number one fan. I know that we are not supposed to mention people in the Public Gallery, but it makes me realise — I took the point earlier — that it has been a bad week for the Minister. I recognise that. Vulnerable voices were heard, and I just hope that we take on board the fact that there are other vulnerable voices out there among our children and young people, and they should be heard as well.

I know that the Committee has welcomed the Minister's commitment to keep looking for a solution that has a Belfast dimension, and I welcome that. It is also important that we recognise the fact that one of the options at the start of the process was to move our services to England. That is no longer on the table, from what we have been told by the board and the Minister.

Following the decision last week, I received a number of letters. Robin has touched on some of the points made. Perhaps the Minister can let us know if he has those letters, because I have been asked to give him a copy if he does not have them. One in particular was from the Children's Heartbeat Trust. It says that, in response to a question from the Committee, the panel stated that no emergency cases were at present being undertaken at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. The letter says that

that is incorrect and that, in fact, specific emergency procedures have been carried out a number of times in 2013, safely and successfully.

It strikes me that, as we have been told all along, the service is safe. It is important to highlight the fact that it is a safe service. The issue is about sustainability. Last week, I asked representatives from the board and the Department why we do not look outside the box. I am hoping you will do that, Minister. Why do we not send the doctors to get that additional experience and surgery, instead of always focusing on the surgery being removed? We can send doctors to other hospitals. The world is a small place now. We can send doctors to get that.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Ms S Ramsey: Yes.

Mr Swann: Does the Member also recognise that removing that will also remove the training facility that is in the Royal Victoria Hospital for other doctors coming in?

Ms S Ramsey: Yes.

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

Ms S Ramsey: Thanks for that extra minute. That is the thing that some of the letters raised.

I also, interestingly, received a copy of a letter that was sent to Dr McCarthy of the working group from a Dr Brian Craig, who is a consultant paediatric cardiologist. It talks about a patient, and I am not going to get into that. In fairness, the letter that I have received does not get into detail. Interestingly, as Robin mentioned in his opening remarks, if the option chosen by the Minister was that there should be no paediatric cardiac surgical presence in Belfast, it would not be possible to carry out any of the balloon procedures in the Belfast Trust without appropriate surgical cover. So there would be a knock-on effect if that decision was made.

I want to take the opportunity to highlight the very positive campaign that parents, aunts, uncles, mothers, fathers and grandparents have been involved in. They have been very vocal and very dedicated in the campaign. They do not want anything above and beyond what is there. I appeal to the Minister in the time that I have left. I know that you have committed to looking at all of this closely, and I know that a

number of deadlines have been set. In your remarks, will you outline to us the time frame for when the final decision will be made? Can you outline to us where the thinking of the Health Minister in Dublin is on this? One service on two sites seems to me to be a reasonable solution. As I say, vulnerable voices were heard last week. You listened to them, you took it on the chin, and you have had a bloody nose all week. Let us ensure that the vulnerable voices of those in the next generation, who are our future, are heard and that their parents' voices are heard.

Mr Wells: Sometimes in health there are decisions that require the wisdom of Solomon and the intellect of Einstein. I am sure that the Minister, over the past week, has felt that he needs vast dollops of both qualities. It has been a difficult week. However, I think that we all agree that the present Minister's main focus and aim is always to do what is best and right for vulnerable sections of our society, be they the very elderly or, as in this case, the very young. This is one of those difficult decisions that requires the wisdom of Solomon.

At the outset, let me say that I think that there are a couple of things that we are agreed on. First, everyone is agreed on the quality of the provision that we have in the Clark clinic in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. No one, for one minute, would lift a finger to criticise any of what occurred in the past. In fact, the Minister has said frequently, Mr Swann, that the present service is safe. There is no doubt about that. However, it is not sustainable, and that is the difficulty that we face.

Secondly, I think that we would all want to wish Evan Swann all the best in the next few weeks. We are rooting for him. We know that that places the honourable Member for North Antrim in a totally different position to the rest of us. He has walked that walk. He knows exactly what it is like to feel anguish and concern for a very small, vulnerable child. Therefore, it is difficult for those of us who have never faced that to have full empathy and understanding. However, we can all agree that we would love to see Robin's son prosper in the next few months.

At the end of the day, we are not facing an unusual situation. The reality in Northern Ireland, whether we like it or not, is that consultants are becoming more and more specialist by the day. When I go to the numerous healthcare awards, it never ceases to amaze me when these young people walk up and get the award for consultant of the year.

To me, a consultant is Sir Lancelot Spratt in the 'Carry On' films with the glasses on the nose and the handlebar moustache and looking about 80. Frankly, I am seeing his grandsons qualify as consultants in Northern Ireland at the moment. It really is quite shocking how young people qualify and immediately go towards specialism. The difficulty is — it is a very unpleasant situation — that we simply do not have enough procedures in Northern Ireland to warrant the continuation of the service that we have had for so long. Indeed, on the island of Ireland as a whole, there are just about enough specialist procedures to warrant the provision of that service. If anyone has any doubt about that, they should look across the water to the rest of the United Kingdom to see the trend there. Exactly the same decisions are being made in parts of England and Wales. The number is insufficient, so the decision is being made to close some units and to concentrate services in a finite number of specialist hospitals.

No longer ago than last Wednesday, the Committee looked at the issue. We all wanted to have some hope that there was a way of retaining the present service. However, I have to say that, after stiff questioning from all Committee members, many of whom have a huge degree of sympathy for the parents groups that are concerned about this, I know in my mind that we are really in a terribly difficult position. I have to say that. I listened with interest to the Heartbeat Trust and to the view that the figure of 400 was far too high and that it should be less than 300. I also listened to the view that adding older young people who have a congenital heart condition would bring the number up to a sufficient level to enable the surgeons to continue providing a specialist service. I was then told that there are only about 30 such people in Northern Ireland. So, even when you add them in, you still do not have the quantum required to run the service.

The other thing that shocked me was to hear that, since November, all the specialist operations involving children from Northern Ireland are being done in Dublin already. Children are being taken down there. I know that that is not what most people want — they want them to be much closer to home — but I have not received any evidence that any of our children have suffered as a result of that decision.

This is simply a report on the Minister's desk. No final decision has been made on it. I know that he is still considering the issue. We all hope that he can come up with a solution that addresses parents' concerns —

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

Mr Wells: — and makes it sustainable. This is one of those difficult decisions that is not black and white but very much grey.

Mr McDevitt: I will pick up on some of what has already been said. This is not a debate about whether we need to integrate paediatric congenital cardiac services on the island of Ireland: we know that we do. It is not a debate about the fact that the population base needed to support a clinical team of the standard that we want to be able to make Robin's young son and all the other kids better will be all-island in nature: we know that it will. It is a debate about how to go about delivering that service.

There is an obvious route: centralise the service, send it down to the new hospital that will be built on the site of St James's, give the research opportunities to the universities in Dublin and provide a great further training opportunity to established medical schools in Dublin. As sure as hell, a lot of what we need to achieve will be achieved that way. However, that is not the ambitious solution. It is not thinking about the opportunity that is in front of us right here, right now. It is not why we develop North/South co-operation. North/South co-operation is not about the North sending all its difficult issues south. It is and has to be also about the South acknowledging from time to time that there are things that we do very well here.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: Yes.

Mr Wells: That sounds wonderful, Mr McDevitt. However, as we saw last Wednesday when the Southern authorities were asked whether we could have a one-service-on-two-sites model, whereby they would agree to send a significant proportion of their patients north of the border, the answer was very clearly no. It takes two to tango, and the Republic is not prepared to reduce its quantum to a level that would endanger the viability of its service.

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

Mr McDevitt: Mr Wells quoted Einstein and someone else earlier, but I did not realise that he was also being prophetic. That is something that I wish to test, because I am not aware of a policy statement being made by the Southern authorities. However, if that is the way in which

the Department of Health sees matters in the Republic of Ireland, it needs to look again. That is not the new Ireland. It is not what we are trying to build on this island, and it is not necessarily in the best interests of children anywhere in Ireland.

Our opportunity is crystal clear. It is to continue to develop Belfast as a training centre. It is to retain Belfast as a surgical centre for children from Northern Ireland and, most likely, from the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. It is to integrate our clinical teams so that, as has been suggested, clinicians move and not children. It is to integrate our training so that clinicians are able to work at the highest possible level because they move, not the children. The promise of the Good Friday Agreement is lived out at times such as this. It is tested when we are confronted by such issues, which have nothing to do with your constitutional position but everything to do with the will of two jurisdictions to work together in the interests of all the people in those jurisdictions.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: In a second.

If the authorities in the Republic are behaving in a way that considers only the interests of the people south of the border, they are not just letting down children across Ireland but wasting their opportunity to develop clinical models that would be held up around the world as models that show the way ahead for expert clinical integrated networks and commissioning.

5.00 pm

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. I am glad that he touched on that theme. At last week's meeting, I asked the officials whether, if the political will was there and a political directive was made by Minister Reilly and Minister Poots, a decision could be made to have one service on two sites. We were basically told, in a nutshell, "Yes". So, it is not even a clinical issue now.

Mr McDevitt: For me and, I think, for all of us, this is not a clinical issue, because we are not the clinicians: we can only read the reports. However, we know that at least three of the eight options that were considered by the expert working group involved different models of all-island networks, all of which were on the table because they were clinically workable. We also know that, clinically, GB is off the table

because it is too risky, not because of some political statement.

The question for this House — all of us together, supporting our Minister — and for colleagues in the Oireachtas is whether we are going to be ambitious, imaginative, innovative and brave. Are we going to develop models that others, as I said before —

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

Mr McDevitt: — will look to as best practice in the years ahead? I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I fully support the motion and thank Robin Swann for bringing it to the Floor.

I want to express my disgust at the initial findings of the very first report. It stated that paediatric cardiac surgery based at the Royal was safe but that it was not sustainable and could no longer be performed there. It has been suggested that contained in that report were a great many flaws and comparisons, and many questions remain unanswered on how decisions were reached at that time. It seems really strange to me that a first-class service that has performed extremely successfully on the Royal site, with the back-up of the excellent facilities provided at the Clark clinic, for over 30 years has suddenly been thrown into disarray, confusion, uncertainty and possible closure as a result of that report.

We are talking about infants' lives. Do not let us ever forget the many lives that have been saved in the Royal. That has been shown over and over again, particularly recently, when there has been, and continues to be, a massive public campaign by the Children's Heartbeat Trust, parents and young people who have survived due to the Belfast clinic. Our general public have been very supportive of a local life-saving facility remaining here in Belfast.

I also pay tribute to Robin Swann for speaking so eloquently about the life of his young son, which will depend on the cardiac unit in the Royal. That service must remain to save further babies. We wish young Evan a very speedy recovery.

We pay tribute to all the consultants, clinicians, doctors, nurses and everyone who has worked in the children's cardiac unit for saving lives over so many years. I pay particular tribute to Conor Mulholland, who has been mentioned before, for his tremendous service at the unit

over so many years and to others there. Mr Mulholland continues to fully lend his support to the facility remaining in Belfast.

The recently published options document can, in parts, be welcomed, but I sincerely hope that we can develop the option not only to have a combined operational facility at Our Lady's hospital in Dublin but for a life-saving facility to remain at the Royal. The Alliance Party fully supports the submissions and analysis made by the Children's Heartbeat Trust. That group is surely best placed to call for the retention of a service in Belfast. They are the people who had the infants and children saved by the Royal's cardiac unit and the Clark Clinic. They have expressed, very succinctly and in minute detail, all the good reasons for its continued existence. I appeal this afternoon to our Health Minister, who has the final say, to say yes and to work with Dr Reilly in Dublin and make combined use of the excellent facilities in Belfast and Dublin. We all want to save lives, and if we were to allow Belfast to be closed, lives would almost certainly be lost. We must not allow that to happen.

The important part of the motion asks our Minister to select a model that retains primary provision and, if humanly possible, the ability to operate on emergency admissions in the Royal in Belfast simply to save lives. I support the motion.

Ms Brown: I rise as a member of the Health Committee to speak on the motion and to support its intention.

We have an opportunity to contribute to a debate that will help to shape the future of paediatric congenital cardiac services, and we have a responsibility to consider what is in the very best interests of each and every vulnerable child who requires those life-saving services. Since the Assembly last debated the subject in September, when the House called on the Minister to explore an all-island solution, I have been genuinely troubled by the apparent dilemma that this sensitive issue causes to all those with an interest in seeing an effective and safe service for our children. Of course, my dilemma is nothing compared with the anxiety and distress faced by those parents, including Robin Swann, whose children have been and will be directly affected by the outcomes of today's debate. Nevertheless, I am genuinely concerned that we do the right thing by those children. We may disagree on what exactly the right thing is but provided we treat the matter and each other with respect and dignity as we debate and discuss it, I hope that we will at least demonstrate to all those involved, be they

parents, children or family members or those in the medical profession, that we are trying to do the right thing. I suspect that it is natural for us all to want the best services professionally delivered with the minimum of inconvenience to a family unit. That is the ideal, but as we are seeing in so many areas of the public service, we can no longer afford or deliver the ideal in every case. It is sometimes simply not possible, which saddens me, but it is the truth and the reality that we face.

The other reality is that being a member of the Health Committee does not, sadly, make me an expert, and I am, therefore, obliged and grateful to the many experts who come before us weekly to advise us and to offer opinions. It is now the case that, for the fourth time, the Health Minister is faced with experts telling him that paediatric congenital cardiac surgery in Belfast, despite being successful and excellent, is not sustainable. Of course I want Belfast to be the centre of excellence. In many senses, I believe that it is, but I have concerns that will probably not be addressed today but only in due course when all the options have been considered and the facts and figures are assessed.

There is a temptation to look at today's motion and to ask oneself what will happen if a child's life is lost because there is no service in Belfast or because a partnership service with Dublin or wherever has failed because of transport difficulties or some other reason. However, what if we do not heed the warnings being given to us and, at some point in the future, a parent asks us why we did not do something about the lack of sustainability in Belfast, why we did not have a plan or why we did not consider other options?

I support today's motion because I want Belfast to be part of the solution. However, I want to finish by saying that my primary concern, over and above where the service is delivered, is that our children will be safe and will receive the very best treatment now and in the future.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: As a number of Members said, this is a highly emotive issue, and we must ensure that the needs of children and young people are paramount in the debate. Each year, as was stressed, around 140 children require this vital surgery in the North of Ireland. It is important to reflect on the fact that the report on the review of the service, which was published in July 2011, did not identify any immediate safety concerns but concluded that the surgical element of the service in Belfast was unsustainable.

The review on which all this was based is, in my opinion, flawed. It did not consider the difference between 1.8 million people living here as opposed to over 60 million across the water. Last week, at the Health Committee meeting, it was confirmed that the sustainable figure of a minimum of 400 surgeries a year is also based on the safe and sustainable English model.

It was also confirmed by the Health Department last week that the Minister makes the final decision and that his decision will be brought to the Floor of the House. That is important because there have been issues around communication with parents and families throughout the entire process.

I welcome the fact that the Minister, in his statement of 25 April, said that he wanted to have further conversations with his counterparts in Dublin before making any decision. However, a number of issues need to be clarified. If, as the July 2011 report indicated, there were no safety issues in the Belfast model, why did all five of the options that contained a Belfast element score zero against the criteria dealing specifically with safety and quality?

Option 4 in the options paper, which suggested a Belfast/Dublin solution, scored 195 points. The paper stated:

"such a model could not meet the agreed commissioning standards on both sites."

What does that mean?

The report goes on to state:

"an all-island model had not however been realised, largely because of challenges in the staffing and sustainability of safe, high quality surgical services".

I suggest to the Minister that these are the real issues behind this debate. Reporting standards have been different, North and South, and already stretched services in Dublin are being asked to do more. Where does that capacity come from?

Are there barriers to the recruitment of cardiac consultants in Belfast? Are there obstacles that prevent surgeons employed in one so-called jurisdiction working in the other? Those are the real issues that need to be addressed in order to enhance and protect this vital life-saving service.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies offered a number of valuable insights in a recent report on unlocking the potential of cross-border hospital planning, and this is where I take issue with Mr Wells. The report shows a higher incidence of paediatric cardiac disease in Ireland and a consistently higher demand for services. It suggests that one of the reasons for that is the large increase in the Twenty-six Counties in the incidence of Down's syndrome, which has a high risk of cardiac disease. The report also indicates that diagnostic capacity has improved, leading to more referrals for surgery.

Belfast has maintained a service with a single surgeon supported by the adult cardiac surgical team and has done it well. The service has been delivered by a locum surgeon, and, as we know, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has been trying to recruit a full-time replacement surgeon, but this has proved difficult.

Last year, 560 procedures were conducted in Dublin, and the team there said that it would like to have treated 100 more patients. The figure has increased from 400 three years ago, so there is a mismatch of expectations. The North would have to buy the service from the Twenty-six Counties, but the capacity does not exist to take in extra patients without a commitment to invest in capacity expansion.

These are the real issues that need to be worked through to ensure that the service is delivered as an all-Ireland model.

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

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I will. As Conall McDevitt said, it is worth looking at this matter in the context of the opportunities that can be provided by the new national hospital in Dublin. If extra capacity can attract support in the North, there is an opportunity to develop an all-Ireland model for this vital life-saving service.

5.15 pm

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak to this motion, which is on a very important matter affecting everyone across Northern Ireland. This issue has been on the agenda for some time, especially for those of us who are on the Health Committee. We all recognise Robin Swann's situation, and, as a parent, I feel for him and wish him and his son well for the future.

I commend the Children's Heartbeat Trust and others who have fought very strong campaigns. At the very first public meeting that I attended in Bangor in my constituency, I immediately was struck by the genuine concern and feeling around this very sensitive issue. It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to my constituent Maria Kennedy and her family from Bangor. They have been at the forefront of this campaign and have gone through so much with heart surgery from the Clark clinic at the Royal Victoria Hospital. I also put on record our support for the Clark clinic. I visited the clinic with the Committee and saw for myself the excellent life-saving work that was carried out. The many children and young people who are alive today, some of whom have attended events up here, are testimony to the skilled team of clinical care staff at the Clark clinic. Many children and young people continue to go to the Clark clinic for ongoing treatment and surgery and depend on it for further operations or cardiac services. We all realise that the number of operations performed in Belfast is around 90, with around 40 currently going to Dublin and Birmingham.

The skills issue is critical to the standards of surgery and care for the maintenance of a cardiac team at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The argument is made that, at present, we do not have enough operations a year to maintain that skills base in the team. One option is to bring patients into Northern Ireland from other areas of the UK and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland to increase those figures to at least 300 operations a year and thus maintain our skills base. What is important is that any additional service provided in the Republic of Ireland must be to the highest quality standards available and totally compatible with that provided in Northern Ireland. We must have an assurance that the skills base in Dublin is to the highest standard and that hospital provision is adequate in capacity to deal with any additional workload from Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: Yes, I will indeed.

Mr Swann: I want to clarify on the issue of increased workload. On Radio Ulster a week or so ago, Dr Reilly said that they had just cleared their waiting list. Does the Member know how adding all the children from Northern Ireland onto their waiting list will increase it again or have any effect?

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

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. That is one issue that the Committee is concerned about, and I understand that the Minister is in further discussions on that matter.

From discussions in the Health Committee, I know that there are concerns that Crumlin hospital's provision is being stretched. A brand new replacement hospital is planned but is still several years away. The transfer time for patients, children and parents from Northern Ireland is another area of concern. We are told that the standard time is three to four hours, but this would be a challenge for some areas of Northern Ireland, such as the north-west of the Province. The other option that should be considered is the use of an air ambulance. Helicopter provision may be required for the critical condition of some children, but such discussions are still ongoing, and no assurances have yet been given.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: Yes, I will.

Mr Beggs: Is the Member aware of the considerable vibration in helicopter flight, which could be a distinct problem?

Mr Dunne: I am no expert, but I understand that cardiac services would be available, and it would be an air ambulance that we are talking about.

We have been given assurances that parents and family members will be provided with suitable accommodation at the Dublin hospital and that all such costs will be met by the various trusts. In summary, it is important that, where there is a real life-threatening emergency, where time is against you with ever-increasing risk, a cardiac service is available in Belfast for critically ill babies. I urge the Minister to treat this matter sensitively and ensure that an adequate quality service is in place for the children of Northern Ireland.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, am a member of the Health Committee. At this stage of the debate, everything has more or less been said. There are maybe just a couple of things.

Throughout this, the Minister has stated that his key priority is to ensure the delivery of a safe and sustainable service for these vulnerable children. In so doing, he wishes to ensure that he has fully explored every possibility for addressing the concerns that have been raised with him by parents and consultants. I

commend the Children's Heartbeat Trust and other groups for the lobbying that they have done.

Mr Wells talked about the wisdom of Solomon. I actually think the Minister probably has to take a harder decision than Solomon's, because more complex issues are involved. Travel time from Belfast to Dublin has been mentioned. I live in Newry, and it is easy to say that the travel time is probably about 50 or 55 minutes. Robin Swann said that the minimum travel time would be one hour and 55 minutes or two hours — something like that. However, he made a very important point. We sympathise with him, his family and his son, and we wish them all the best. He made the point that, in their case, it was not feasible. I am sure that he will correct me if I am wrong or I misheard him. In that particular case, it simply would not have been possible to travel and have the operation done.

I endorse what my colleagues, Sue Ramsey and Maeve McLaughlin, have said. At the Committee last week, the Chairperson asked officials whether, if there was the political will, we could have one service at two sites. I am sure that that is something that the Minister can consider. Ultimately, what is important in all this is that the best service is provided for those children. People have talked about walking in the shoes of Robin Swann, but I do not think any of us can do that until we have experienced that particular situation. I am sure that other parents would agree. This is something that does not stop. It is ongoing. The issue has also been raised of children who have congenital heart problems, who will sometimes continue to need surgery into their late teens and even into adulthood. So it is essential that that service is sustained and maintained.

Robin Swann also made the point that doctors could go to other venues for training. I am not sure that that is not a possibility or why it should not be considered. Presumably, all surgeons have to keep up with training. If some of them can get it on site, that is fine; if they cannot, I do not think that it would be unreasonable for them to travel to other sites. One of the issues that have come out of the recommendations and the options is that children will no longer have to travel to England. However, I know that in many cases, where there are particular issues involved, children have to travel to Birmingham because it is a centre of expertise.

So the Minister has to take a big decision. He has heard enough today. I am sure that he will make an informed decision, but it is a difficult one. I know that it will not be affected by budget, money or anything else. The decision

has to be taken in the knowledge that these children are vulnerable and they have to be looked after in the best possible way. They must have the best possible service provided. I am sure that, at the of the day, that is what everyone wants.

Dr McDonnell: I am very glad that this motion is being debated and that we have an opportunity of discussing this very contentious issue. It is listed here as the preferred option document by the paediatric congenital cardiac services working group. It is a mouthful.

The report is useful. It gives a lot of information and will no doubt be the subject of debates. The debate will not end here today. However, I am delighted, and I feel that I should congratulate colleagues around the Chamber and across the House for the sober and sensible approach that they have taken to this very serious issue.

It is important that we take the issue seriously and that the best possible answer emerges. On that point, it would be remiss of me not to echo Jim Wells, if I might — if I am allowed — and commend the Minister for trying to do the honest thing. He has the humility to recognise that, when he is on the wrong road, he should change course. Having had many conversations with the Minister on these issues and on this in particular, I know that he is intent on doing the honest thing and on getting the best solution for the affected children and their parents.

We have talked a bit about the service at the Royal being safe. I believe that it is safe. I know that it is safe, and a lot of the parents there have told me that they feel that it is safe. However, going forward, "safe" may not be enough, because people want "safer" and even the "safest possible". That is where the difficulty lies. Although some of my colleagues around the Chamber talked about sending a consultant here, a registrar-in-training there or a senior registrar somewhere else, we are talking about human beings. Sometimes they have families, and sometimes it is not easy to shove somebody here or somebody else there. One of the solutions that I would like to see explored at some stage is having some sort of team in Belfast that is integrated with what is happening in Dublin and in the UK.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for giving way. Is he aware of successful two-site working elsewhere in the world, such as in Toronto and Ottawa and in San Francisco and Sacramento?

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

Dr McDonnell: Indeed, I am obliged to the Member for East Antrim for reminding me of that. Having visited Toronto a number of times, I am aware of the comprehensive working arrangements there. Sometimes the arrangements are with not just Ottawa but Thunder Bay and Sioux Lookout and all sorts of strange places on the periphery. It is possible to have that, but it requires a system of contractual arrangements. Before the person takes up the consultancy job, the job specification has to be right.

For many of us — indeed, I think for all of us across the House — the debate is about maintaining the maximum service locally for the children who require such surgery. It is also about ensuring that, where infants and parents have to travel, they have the option of minimal disruption while ensuring maximum safety from a health perspective. It is worth mentioning that, aside from the factual and clinical aspects, there is so much emotion, worry and anxiety for the parents and the extended family of a child with a congenital heart problem. From my perspective, I urge the Minister to maximise whatever service can be retained in Belfast within the realms of staff availability and safety. As others outlined, I ask the Minister to explore mechanisms for sharing key staff, whether they are surgeons, anaesthetists or the whole team of support staff. This is not about one surgeon operating on his or her own; paediatric surgery for congenital cardiac disease requires a very significant team. Can we be ingenious about finding new ways of working with Dublin, Birmingham and wherever else to use whatever resources we have to the maximum benefit?

I will mention again the option of a shared training programme, where, as others suggested, we retain a maximum outpost. However, the anxieties in the report fall into the criterion that was used. I could not disagree with the specification. I am not sure about the weighting at times —

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

Dr McDonnell: — and the elements in it. Worried parents need to be convinced that as much as possible of the pre-operative assessment and the post-operative care can be done as close to home as possible. They need to be convinced that everything that can be done in Belfast will be done there.

5.30 pm

Mr Gardiner: The health service is always at risk from any exercise involving change. I understand the need for change, but the problem with change in a service that is as complex as the health service is that, when you unpick one aspect of it, unintended consequences follow.

I have an underlying concern that the level of cardiac emergency care for children that exists in Belfast under the present arrangements will disappear under any Dublin-only arrangement. Given that a 24/7 emergency service is cited as a requirement for a safe and quality service, we need to ask whether Northern Ireland healthcare may be damaged by the total loss of the local surgical service in Belfast. That would be an unintended consequence that I am sure the Minister, along with the rest of us, would not want to happen.

In addition to my concern about the accessibility of emergency cover, I have concerns about transport. The official target is to get treatment within three hours and in no more than four hours. The problem with that is that Dublin is 100 miles away from Belfast and is further from other parts of Northern Ireland. Only the Southern part of the route is served by a motorway. In many circumstances, the children involved are too unwell to fly. That means that children will have to spend up to two hours in an ambulance before even getting through the doors of a Dublin hospital. That is two hours or more of the maximum of four hours acceptable for treatment used up before the doctors even get to work. I also believe that, before we propose a 24/7 emergency and urgent transport service, we must test it.

There is also the issue of newly born babies. They appear to have slipped through the net because no emergency transport service is proposed for them. Yet, that is a time of maximum danger. All those concerns spell out one word for sick children, and that word is "danger". I have concerns that bureaucrats are running ahead of health policy on many fronts, proposing cost-effective cuts without due regard for care, and care is what the health service is really about. I support the Minister in saying that we need to retain that care in Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley: I thank Robin Swann for bringing the motion to the House. It shows that we are human beings in the Chamber. We all have families, and we all have things going on in our families. I want to give my heartfelt best wishes to Robin and his family.

Healthcare provision will always be an emotive issue, as we have experienced over the past week. That is especially true when we discuss serious and life-threatening conditions in children and babies. The main criterion that I will always work to when being involved in influencing fundamental decisions, such as the one before us today, is what will provide the safest outcome for those undergoing complex procedures.

We have heard evidence that the retention of surgery in Belfast for cardiac conditions in children is not at a dangerous level; rather, it is the issue of sustainability that has prompted concern. It is right, therefore, that the Minister has been proactive in exploring other options. The commissioning of the working group that consulted those directly affected by any change was evidence of the Minister's commitment to explore every option in this sensitive matter. It is my view, based on evidence from reports and from talking to the families affected, that the best move forward is that a two-centred approach between Belfast and Dublin will provide a safe and sustainable option in future years for children and babies who need the service, not only as infants but throughout their life.

I appreciate that having to travel for surgery is not ideal. As a mother, I also know that I would travel to the ends of the earth to give my child the best chance of a positive outcome. That is what the families want: a positive outcome for their child. However, the added pressure of being away from their support network of family and friends and the uncertainty of the fragility of their child's life must be almost unbearable. At best, a two-centre approach would alleviate the unnecessary anxiety being placed on parents. The additional stress of having to travel for surgery would also be minimised and substantially outweighed by the fact that the surgery would be safer and more sustainable, should their child be one of the 10% who require future surgery.

It is anticipated that, through this change, work will be continued to develop the skill in identifying issues prior to birth to allow for support and planning to be in place and to reduce the number of emergency cases. Thankfully, we in Northern Ireland have low numbers of children requiring heart surgery, though that has led to this review being necessary. It is that low number that means that the service is not sustainable and is likely to become unsafe. Through partnership in a two-centre approach, keeping services here in Belfast, we can ensure that, for families that

need to access the services, we offer the best possible option. I support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have to call the Minister at 5.40 pm.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to participate in an important debate. The subject is close to many hearts, not least that of Mr Robin Swann, who proposed the motion. I commend him for doing so.

At this stage, there is not much to add except to ask the Minister to acknowledge that the concerns of the Children's Heartbeat Trust are about not only the retention of services in Belfast but the removal of cardiac services and the threat that that would then place on other service users. I understand that 70 families currently travel down to Belfast for interventions during the year. The removal of the service from Belfast would put that service at risk.

There is also evidence from elsewhere of the potential for the deskilling of other professionals. For example, once a centre loses its surgical element, the continued provision of medical and diagnostic paediatric cardiac services greatly deteriorates. That is evident in that children's cardiology centres in Manchester, Edinburgh and Cardiff no longer perform standard diagnostic catheterisations and are reporting difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff. Training opportunities in Belfast are unlikely to be attractive or even available, as demonstrated from a recent meeting of paediatric cardiology trainees in the UK, where it was agreed that a paediatric cardiology trainee should not spend more than six months of a five-year training programme at a non-surgical centre. The resultant deskilling will directly affect the cardiology unit and will indirectly diminish other specialties in the children's hospital, which will gain much less experience of working with patients with CHD, for example in anaesthesia and intensive care. There are also concerns about the availability of paediatric intensive care beds.

I hope that the Minister will come to the right decision that meets all the concerns expressed by parents, families and professionals.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I will dispense with the speech that was given to me.

Mr McDevitt: That could be dangerous.
[Laughter.]

Mr Poots: The Member is right: it is somewhat dangerous but nonetheless.

I want to respond, first of all, to the issues raised. In our previous discussion of health issues today, there may have been accusations of people playing politics and so forth. That cannot be said of this debate. This is how debates should take place: reasoned, measured and with people putting their case. People, especially Robin, have spoken from the heart, and we all appreciate that.

I hope that, as I respond, Members will also understand the difficult circumstances that I find myself in in arriving at the right decision on the issue and doing the right thing for the children. That is what it is about: children.

Mr Swann raised a number of issues, including where the figure 400 came from; why Scotland has not adhered to Safe and Sustainable numbers; why — I cannot make out the writing — the South is operational with 250 procedures; and why various royal colleges do not endorse Safe and Sustainable?

The specific standard required by the HSCB drew on those developed by the Safe and Sustainable process, but they have been amended to reflect the specific needs of the Northern Ireland population. They are based on the need for surgeons to have a sufficient caseload to maintain their skills, which is generally accepted as being around 100 cases a year. In addition, there needs to be a robust 24/7 rota to provide that service, which normally takes at least three surgeons. Scotland provides a service with a 24/7 rota, which is provided by three surgeons for over 300 cases a year.

As regards the Heartbeat Trust and the assertion that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust contrived to undertake emergency PCS procedures, which Sue Ramsey commented on, the Belfast Trust has confirmed that, from December 2012 to April 2013, no paediatric cardiac surgical procedures were undertaken in Belfast and emergency cases travelled to Dublin, where surgery was undertaken on the children who required it. Ms Ramsey also raised the issue —

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, sure.

Ms S Ramsey: I said to the Minister that I was quoting from a letter from the Children's Heartbeat Trust and from a letter from a

consultant in the Royal. I will pass them on to the Minister because they are direct quotes.

Mr Poots: I will be happy to receive them. You also asked whether we could outline a time frame for the final decision and what was Minister Reilly's thinking. I am meeting Minister Reilly about the issue tomorrow, so, to that extent, the debate is timely.

The Health Service Executive in the ROI informed the HSCB that it does not believe that it would be feasible to deliver a two-centre model on an all-Ireland basis. I am meeting Minister Reilly to explore the possibilities. I do not accept that that is the case, but that is the view of the Health Service Executive. I wish to challenge it on that.

Conall McDevitt referred to the need for integration of the all-Ireland service and the need for true North/South co-operation.

There is a recommendation to maintain and strengthen the cardiology service in Belfast, with the option to care for children from outside Northern Ireland wherever the surgery is performed and to ensure close networking between the cardiologists and surgeons caring for children from Northern Ireland. I welcomed two elements of the report: the enhancement of the cardiology service and taking that service to Altnagelvin, the South West Acute Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital; and the movement away from transferring children to England for elective surgery except for complex cases that require such support. We can build on those positive things that were presented to us.

Kieran McCarthy raised the issue of the safety of the current services. Recent reports show that there are systemic safety concerns. Sir Ian Kennedy said that it would be high-risk to continue to provide surgery in Belfast. Mr McCarthy also referred to services suddenly being thrown into disarray. We have known for many years that PCS services in Belfast were vulnerable, with changing clinical standards and higher patient and parent expectations, and it has been recognised that maintaining such a small volume service would be exceptionally difficult. Sir Ian Kennedy's report provided the expert view, confirming that systemic concerns exist in the current service.

Maeve McLaughlin raised the issue of Dublin undertaking around 550 procedures last year. The validated data from the central cardiac audit database (CCAD) states that, in 2011-12, there were 426 procedures. So, the total volume of activity in the ROI and Northern Ireland was approximately 536 procedures.

The argument is slightly more difficult when it comes to the two-centre model because Dublin has said that it does not want to dilute the service that it provides in order to support and sustain a two-centre model that would include Belfast.

5.45 pm

Maeve McLaughlin asked why the Belfast options scored zero for safety and quality. The options were scored against criteria agreed by the working group for safety and quality, and they included standards for surgical and nursing staff. The working group felt that those standards could not be met in Belfast in the foreseeable future. So that is the working group's recommendation, not mine. She also asked whether there was a barrier to recruiting a paediatric cardiac surgeon for Belfast. The view of the working group is that there are insufficient numbers to recruit.

Gordon Dunne raised the issue of emergency transfer. The majority of cases being transferred will travel by road as opposed to air ambulance, although there is the potential for that. Recently, one case took 90 minutes. I will discuss that later, when I outline what my thoughts are.

Maeve McLaughlin asked whether there were restrictions on doctors working across countries. Doctors need to be registered with the General Medical Council to work in the UK and with the Medical Council to work in the Republic of Ireland. So it is possible for doctors to register with both councils and work in both countries.

Sam Gardiner was concerned about Belfast losing 24/7 cover. At present, Belfast is not able to provide 24/7 emergency surgical cover. That is currently done with the support of Dublin. He also raised the issue of cost. In fact, the preferred option and the model being produced by the board is a more expensive model than the current one, so no one need think that this is a cost-saving exercise.

There is no easy solution to all of this. I hear from one side that, if you take a decision to remove services from Belfast and have surgical services provided outside Belfast, children will lose their life. I hear people from the other side say that, given the complexity of paediatric congenital cardiac surgery, children will lose their life if the service is not on a site on which the full range of expertise is available 24/7. You would need the wisdom of Solomon and a whole lot more to get this right. It is hugely

challenging, and it is definitely not easy to square this circle.

I also hear about safety and sustainability. As it stands, the service has consistently been recognised as being safe. It is important to identify that and to acknowledge that we have not been putting children's lives at risk through the service provided.

The provision of a service in which one surgeon is supported by a retired surgeon is not sustainable. The question is this: how would we make a service in Belfast sustainable? I need to have that discussion with my counterparts in Dublin. For a service in Belfast to be sustainable, I would need more procedures. If I am to have more procedures, going down the route of Mr McDevitt's true North/South co-operation, would the South give them to us? Take children in the border counties, for example. If we provide an enhanced cardiology service with facilities available in Altnagelvin, the south-west and Craigavon, the achievement of which requires high-quality telepresence and telemonitoring, could we also provide a surgical service to children based in border counties? That is a decision for the HSE and Minister Reilly. My suspicion is that people in Donegal would prefer to travel to Belfast than to Dublin, and there may be other parts of the border counties for which that would be more suitable.

In that instance, could we get the number of procedures that would allow us to go out and go after another surgeon? Even if there were a two-surgeon model — it has worked in other places, but is not particularly common across the UK or, indeed, in Ireland — in place, we would have to engage in a discussion with Dublin that would allow those surgeons to practice there on occasions in order to allow them to maintain and expand their expertise. Surgeons would expect that. They would want to deliver the best for children in Belfast. In order to do that, we would need that co-operation.

We also have only two anaesthetists in Belfast who are qualified to deliver that service. One imagines that if one anaesthetist was on holiday and the other was carrying out his service in an operation, a paediatric congenital cardiac emergency would put a strain on the service as well. So, it is not just an issue of having more surgeons; we need to look at the issue of anaesthetists and, indeed, an entire team. I need to have that discussion with my colleagues in the Republic of Ireland. If we are truly talking about North/South co-operation on the issue, that is the type that I need to be able

to get. I do not know whether I can get it. I do not wish to raise false expectations before the House today, particularly for the parents of those children. They have come through too much for me to go down a route that gives them false hope. I say to the House today that I do not want to go down the route that is recommended by the board. I want to go down the route that I outlined to you today, but I need the co-operation of colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to do that. I will make the case for that very strongly.

Last week, I visited the hospital. It was a private visit. I was invited by a couple of parents to come to see their children. I have got to know a couple of parents over the period. As I went through the door of the hospital, I bumped into a family from Dungiven whose little girl was there. She was running about and in great form, which was absolutely super to see. They were very keen that surgery would remain in Belfast because they, of course, have an additional hour-plus to travel from Dungiven to Belfast in the first instance. Then, I met a father who was getting something to eat. His child had been in Birmingham for an operation. He was very clear that Birmingham was the right place for the operation. He said that it was too complex for Dublin to deal with and that his child had got the right care in Birmingham. I met another family whose child had had an operation carried out in Dublin. The child's mother said that, actually, the right surgeon for her child is in Dublin. So, there is a range of options for parents, but the one that many parents want to see is surgical care being provided in Belfast. I cannot stand before the House and say honestly that I can deliver that, but I will stand before the House and say honestly that I will certainly give it my best shot. I will come back to the House, and if I cannot deliver surgical care in Belfast, I will tell you that I cannot deliver it. We will have to take those decisions when we arrive at them.

As things stand, that is my view on what we should try to do. I know the recommendation that was put to me by the board. I beg to differ with it on the issue because I think that we can truly test whether Dublin is the safer option only when that is actually carried out. If it is not the safer option, it would be impossible to reverse. Therefore, I want to try to look at other options first.

Mr Beggs: Robin Swann spoke very movingly about his son who has recently undergone cardiac surgery in the paediatric unit in Belfast. We all cannot help but feel for him. I am sure that he will have appreciated the good wishes that Members across the House expressed.

He questioned the figure of 450 that has been set. He highlighted that 15% of the hospitals in the world that carry out those types of operations do not meet it. Certainly, we all need to reflect on that: the numbers game and how that is set. In particular, Robin questioned the so-called preferred option. He said that parents did not prefer it and that there is an indication that the vast majority of clinicians in Belfast do not prefer it either. So, clearly, the health commissioners are not carrying the vital players in this area with them. They are failing to properly engage with them and to convince them of their argument.

Perhaps one of the most striking things that Robin said was that despite the best of planning, with his wife to be in hospital a week early, young Evan decided to come even earlier than that. There is a great deal of uncertainty as to what the outcome might have been had surgery not been available in Belfast. No one can fail to be moved by that very practical example.

We have to welcome the aspects of the review of paediatric cardiac surgery that will bring about improvements. For instance, I suspect that the issue of a paediatric MRI scanner would not have been progressed as fast if that had not been highlighted in the report. So, as a result of the report, there will be increased investment in modern technology, which will mean fewer risks when diagnosing what may be wrong with a young child. However, that does not mean to say that we have to agree with everything in the report and to follow it blindly.

As a member of the Health Committee, I was concerned about the fact that — Sue Ramsey raised this — the Department and the trust advised us that no emergency operations were happening in Belfast, when certainly the Children's Heartbeat Trust advised us that there had been a number of operations in recent months. Indeed, we are aware of a letter from a consultant who indicated that there had been an emergency balloon atrial septostomy, and that had that type of operation not been carried out, the child would not have been stable, and the outcomes would have been very uncertain if there had been undue delays or travel in such an unstable condition. We were also made aware that some of these conditions cannot be detected. In fact, only 90% of some of the conditions are found at birth, and a relatively low number are detected at an earlier stage.

I think that there is wide agreement in the House that having a Belfast-Dublin network, with emergency services remaining in Belfast,

is the preferred option and should be explored further. I have concerns that the Health and Social Care Board was advised by its Dublin counterparts that it would not be feasible for children living in the Republic of Ireland to be referred to Belfast or for clinical staff from the centre to support 24/7 cover on two sites. I ask why not: why can we not adapt our services, whether they are in Belfast or Dublin, to produce the best for all our children? There are certainly a considerable number of operations occurring in Belfast — 110 was mentioned — as well as additional operations for young adults. On top of that, there are about 40 catheterisations each year. Of course, if there is no surgical back-up, that will not happen in Belfast either because of the associated risk. The potential for cardiology services as a whole to start unravelling then comes into play. A number of Members mentioned the problem of training future cardiologists if there is no surgery present. So, there are difficulties there.

However, there are also opportunities. The Minister himself indicated that if there is a will — he needs support and co-operation from his counterparts in Dublin to perhaps bring in some other operations that are presently referred from border counties to the Dublin centre. However, surely it would be much better for someone living in Donegal if they could be treated more locally, because there would be less trauma for the parents and faster access to emergency services if those were continued in Belfast. So, there are opportunities if there is a willingness to do that.

Conall McDevitt specifically highlighted the need to integrate services in Belfast and Dublin. I heard no voices disagreeing with that approach. I wish the Minister well in his discussions tomorrow with Minister O'Reilly. I hope that the Department of Health in the Republic of Ireland will be more open to change and flexibility. If the health authority is not willing to be flexible, I hope that the Minister will be able to convince his counterpart to increase that degree of flexibility and to look imaginatively at how we can provide the best service for everyone in Northern Ireland.

6.00 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Wells: I think that everyone in the House is agreed that the best option is as the Member said, which is to have one service at two sites: one in Dublin and one in Belfast. However, the

problem is that we cannot compel the Irish authorities to co-operate. It is incumbent on Members such as Mr McDevitt and Ms McLaughlin, who have the ear of the authorities in the Republic at a political level, to put a bit of pressure on Minister O'Reilly to co-operate and to try to assist us in this by urging him to do as he suggested.

Mr Beggs: I fully support that. There needs to be co-operation for everybody's benefit, whether they are in Northern Ireland or on the island of Ireland. I have no difficulty in saying that.

Kieran McCarthy highlighted that the Royal was safe, but he has not understand why it is deemed to be unsustainable. I do not think that the vast majority of parents have fully understood that, and, if that is the case, there clearly needs to be greater engagement. An explanation needs to be given.

There is a danger of professional institutions driving changes that suit their members, with standards that have good outcomes for patients when they reach those super-centres of excellence. There is one question that I have not heard answered and that a number of Members posed. What of those vulnerable children who have to travel? What of those who need immediate surgery? I am not convinced that, by simply ruling them out and creating difficulties from them, there is the greater good. So, I think that there is an onus on us all to try to provide a service in Belfast. We must provide it there, because lives could be lost otherwise.

There is also the risk of de-skilling, which a number of Members mentioned. The full regional children's services could unravel. There is paediatric cardiology to consider, as well as paediatric anaesthetists, who are involved in a very specialist area. What will happen to them? Will we lose that critical mass? So, if that surgery is lost, greater uncertainty will arise.

Pam Brown indicated that, sometimes, it is not possible to do everything. That is true, but we have to look at where we know there will be fatal outcomes. That is a huge warning. Before we end services, we need to look very carefully at where we know there will definitely be fatal outcomes.

A number of Members talked about the flawed report and aspects of it. Maeve McLaughlin highlighted the scoring mechanism. Gordon Dunne said that it was impossible to monitor the skills base in Northern Ireland. He wanted an

assurance that the services in Dublin were of the necessary quality. I think that, in the first instance, we want to try to maintain the service locally in Belfast. I always listen to a doctor in an instance such as this; Alasdair McDonnell thought that two-site working would be possible if contracts were set. I hope that such contracts will be set.

I think that the Minister has the Assembly's best wishes for his discussion tomorrow with his counterparts. I hope that flexibility, as well as an interest in the people of Northern Ireland and the children of the future, will be shown. We wish you well in your discussions. We hope that that two-site model will emerge.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the publication of the preferred option document by the paediatric congenital cardiac services working group and the related Children's Heartbeat Trust report; calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to reject the recommendation of a Dublin-only service for the future commissioning of regional paediatric cardiac surgery and interventional cardiology; and to select a model which retains primary provision and the ability to operate on emergency admissions in Belfast.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease before we move to the next item of business.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Primary Schools: South Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes in which to respond. All other Members who are called to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Dr McDonnell: I am very glad to be able to make a few points in this Adjournment debate about the excessive demand that there is for primary school places generally in south Belfast.

Starting school is one of the great milestones in a child's life. It is also one of the great stress points for parents, and all the parents whom I know want to be able to access comfortably a local primary school that meets their expectations and their child's needs. That is particularly so when a vulnerable four- or five-year-old has extra problems with health or other issues.

The oversubscription for primary school places and, for that matter, accessible nursery school places is unfortunately no stranger in south Belfast. Every year, many of the distressed parents of vulnerable four- and five-year-olds knock on my door to seek a degree of reassurance, comfort and support, and I am sure that colleagues have also experienced that. They are concerned that their child will have to travel a significant distance — indeed, what many perceive to be an intolerable distance — to get into a suitable nursery school or to secure a place in an acceptable primary school. In all those cases, the child has often been rejected by one, two or three nurseries or primary schools closer to home that would and should have been physically, mentally and emotionally much more convenient for the parents and the child.

This year, one of the most acute problems was experienced by parents applying to enrol their children in P1 in the new St Ita's Primary School in the Newtownbreda area. The school is a newbuild that opened in March 2006, and we were told that it would provide more than enough places for years to come. This year again, my office and I were inundated with parents who were very distressed and stressed

to be informed by the Department of Education that their child was being denied their first-preference place in St Ita's. To add to the stress that that placed on parents, they were also informed that St Joseph's Primary School in Carryduff and St Bernard's Primary School at Wynchurch, adjacent Catholic or maintained schools, were not options as all their places had been filled. That left parents who wished to choose the maintained sector or a Catholic education with a severely restricted choice, and having to contemplate sending a P1 child — a five-year-old — on a journey of some miles to the nearest accessible school. Places were on offer in Sunnyside Street, which, for some, was two to three miles away, depending on where they lived.

After much lobbying by affected parents — I put on record my congratulations to them for their determination and all their hard work — and after some correspondence with the Minister and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Minister announced that he had finally approved a development proposal to increase capacity in St Ita's Primary School. The proposal will see an increase in the school's capacity from 525 places to 574, which will mean an increase in the admission number from 75 to 82. I understand that there is a flexibility option that could see that figure go up to 87. I congratulate the Minister and thank him for that. It is a welcome move, but it is a short-term approach to what has been a consistent problem over a number of years in St Ita's and other schools across south Belfast: excessive demand in pockets, although I appreciate that it is in pockets.

The Newtownbreda area of south Belfast, in which St Ita's is situated, is an expanding area of rapid population growth, particularly of young families. New and large housing developments have recently sprung up in Brooke Hall and Bracken Hill, and the potential development of the former Woodlawn garden centre site could result in up to 400 additional new homes in that area. That is not speculative, because homes in nearby Bracken Hill are being built and are selling, despite the downturn and all the rest. In other words, it is a very desirable neighbourhood for young couples and families to live in. In addition to those 400 new homes, there is the potential, though not immediate, for 700 new homes in Carryduff down the road in the medium term. All that growth will have a significant knock-on effect on the demand for nursery and primary school places in that neighbourhood.

Yet, despite the reasonably well-documented development and demographic changes in the

area as Belfast expands southwards, despite the preponderance of young families with nursery and P1-aged children in that change, and despite the fact that, within that population change, there is a very strong parental demand for school places in the maintained sector or the Catholic-ethos sector — that demand is not always for religious reasons, I must add, but is often driven by the high-quality education. St Ita's has achieved sky-high success in the seven years that it has operated. So much so that demand is now coming from beyond the traditional catchment in the Catholic area. There are a number of pupils in the intake who are Protestant and a number who are neither Catholic nor Protestant. Despite all that, CCMS and the Department of Education appear to continue to fail to respond in a strategic or long-term way. While that failure is allowed to continue, oversubscription and excessive demand for school places will be an even bigger problem year on year in south Belfast.

I will give you a simple example: last year, 2012, St Ita's had a demand for 112 nursery places; only 52 could be accepted. That demand for 112 nursery places last year translated this year into 105 P1 applications that were on time and a number that were not. In other words, there were some 110 or 112 children — roughly similar to the demand for nursery places last year. In other words, nursery demand last year gives you a fair reflection of what this year's P1 demand will be, and this year's nursery demand will give you a fair reflection of what the P1 demand will be next year. We know that this year there was a demand for 122 nursery places, and only 52 can be accepted. That suggests, even at a conservative estimate — if we cut the 122 a bit — that there will be at least 112 to 115 P1 places sought next year. That is roughly an increase of 10 from this year, and, again, that is being very conservative. I believe that in 2014, there will be another 10, and in 2015, there will probably be another 10.

The point that is being missed here is that there is a sense that the downturn in housing has arrested or frozen all housing development. There is extra good-quality family housing being built at Brooke Hall and Bracken Hill. My understanding is — I have not actually counted them, but people living there have told me — that 120 houses have opened up there in the past 12 to 18 months. That will only increase demand even further.

We have a degree of crisis on our hands, and I appeal to the Minister, CCMS and all interested parties. I fully recognise the changes that have been made in recent times to allow St Ita's to

expand, but the crisis that I see coming will not be met unless radical action is taken. All the schools in that area, even the likes of Cairnshill, which does have one or two vacancies, will, to my mind, be swamped in the years ahead. My appeal is that we should take a strategic, long-term approach.

6.15 pm

Our expectation was that, if anything, there would be a downturn in demand for school places. While that may be happening in the inner city, it is not happening in the outer city. When there is a bit of a surge like this, we sometimes feel that it is a bulge that will come today and fade next week or next year. However, my sense is that, because of the family-friendly nature of the Newtownbreda and Carryduff areas, the demand will be sustained. We have to make some effort to ensure that children aged four and five are facilitated.

It may be reasonable to expect a child in a rural area to travel two, three or four miles, given school buses and everything else. However, given the heavy traffic and everything else in urban areas, we need to ensure that children there can easily access a primary school near home. That is particularly significant when a child falls ill or when a parent has to be sent for to take the child home from school.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I do not want to take up any more time as I have made my point. Thank you for your indulgence.

Mr Spratt: I thank Dr McDonnell for bringing forward the Adjournment debate. Dr McDonnell covered many of the areas of concern, but I want to say a few things.

I can confirm that there is considerable growth in the Newtownbreda and Carryduff area. As Dr McDonnell stated very clearly, additional housing is due to go up in the area plan, which will increase the numbers going to schools — all schools, hopefully — in the area.

During my year as Mayor of Castlereagh, I had the pleasure of working with St Joseph's and St Ita's. Both those schools have been very successful, and I have always had a good relationship with them. Parents have raised issues with me in relation to not being able to get their child into their school of first choice.

This has been a day of excesses. This morning, we talked about the excesses of amalgamation and the possible amalgamation of three primary schools in the inner south

Belfast area. Now, we are talking about this problem in the outer area.

One of the major issues about which, I think, all our offices get most complaints is not being able to get nursery places. That goes right across the board, including the controlled sector. It is a very frustrating issue for parents, particularly those who want their children to go to that school in the future. The issue of nursery school places needs to be tackled. As Alasdair McDonnell said, applications for nursery school places are a key indicator of the numbers that will apply for P1 places at those schools. They provide an excellent planning method.

There is demand for both of these schools. From this side of the House, I urge the Minister to look at the issue very seriously. There are some places in other schools. Newtownbreda primary school was closed, which created a problem in the area with children being displaced. Children do not now have the opportunity to go there. Cairnshill is pretty well full. It has probably a few places but, as indicated by the unmet need, not a real number.

Children from all faiths are welcome in the controlled sector, and, in many cases, parents choose that option. However, that opportunity is not there either: there are no available places because some other schools have closed. So, there is an issue in that area that needs to be addressed, and the Department needs to look at it again seriously. Progress has been made on nursery places, but that area needs to be looked at so that children can get to the primary school of their choice, particularly if they have brothers or sisters in the school. I urge the Minister to look at that.

I support Dr McDonnell's comments.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also thank Alasdair McDonnell for securing this Adjournment debate. I join the two Members who have spoken in commending the parents and the school, St Ita's in this case, for campaigning well in recent times, particularly the past couple of years, to have the school expanded to take in the increased demand for pupil places. In particular, I thank the parents who have made it very clear to locally elected representatives that there is a growing demand for this sector. This school meets all the criteria that most parents look for when searching for a school for their children.

Like the two Members who have spoken, I welcome the fact that this school has been

granted the ability to expand, which will enable extra pupils to be educated in it. Alasdair McDonnell outlined that there are a number of schools in the area at which some parents, particularly in the Catholic community, want to have their children educated. The only opportunity is for expansion at St Ita's. I firmly welcome the fact that that development proposal has been passed.

From speaking to parents recently and over the past two years, I can safely say that a number of people have been trying to get their children placed in schools. For a number of reasons, there has been more of a focus on St Ita's. However, from speaking to parents, CCMS and others recently, it is clear to me that we have not been doing enough forward planning. The planning process has not been as effective as it needs to be. We heard that part of the reason for the growing demand is an increase in the number of houses in the area. The demographics in the area also continue to change, year on year. Those are key factors that need to be taken into consideration.

As the proposer made clear from the outset, probably one of the most important times in a child's life is being placed in their first class in their first school. For parents, that can be stressful because their child is going to school for the first time and they are trying to get them placed, usually in the school that is closest to home and which has a good reputation.

One school not having as good a reputation as others is another day's discussion. That should not be permissible either. We need to deal with the fact that every school might not be as good as it should be. The Minister is clear in his mind and in his policies that that should not be the case and that every school should be a good school, because that is another way of alleviating the stress that families have to endure when they are looking at schools for their children and are trying to make judgements about which is best for their child's needs.

I am very encouraged by the intention of the Minister and the Department to make sure that every school is a good school because that would take a lot of stress away from parents and families in general and from people in schools such as teachers, principals, boards of governors and other education bodies. Everybody sighed with relief when we heard about the development proposal that advocated expansion for St Ita's. People were grateful that the Minister was able to give approval to that development proposal. I hope and expect that, this year, that will address the needs of a

number of parents to have their children placed in St Ita's and, therefore, in that sector in this constituency. However, I ask the Minister and all other education bodies to ensure that we have processes in place that will allow us to plan in a more effective way than happened in this case.

Mr McGimpsey: Like other Members, I thank Alasdair McDonnell for securing the debate. I have absolutely no problem with supporting the proposition that, where possible, parents should be able to send children to the school of their choice. The choice of primary school when your youngest children are starting P1 is a very important one for families, and a lot of anxiety can go with that if there is competition for places. It seems logical, sensible and necessary that the Department respond to the demand and that the schools should be allowed to expand as required to meet it.

As Jimmy Spratt said, this is a juxtaposition with this morning's debate on inner south Belfast, where none of the three primary schools is sustainable in its current building. All have empty desks, so we are looking at an amalgamation of three into one in the controlled sector. That is partly due to population drift. As people move from inner south Belfast to outer south Belfast, that is reflected in the demand for schools, but it is also because of the division of our education system into sectors. As mentioned, four years ago, Newtownbreda Primary School was shut because of a lack of numbers, yet primary schools a mile or two up the road are bursting at the seams and need expansion. It does not stop there. Look at what happened recently in the secondary sector in south Belfast, with schools such as Dunmurry High School, Balmoral High School on Blacks Road and Lisnasharragh High School closing. Orangefield High School has a question mark over it, there is now a big question mark over Knockbreda High School, and a number of schools are closing in the state sector.

Rationalisation is clearly required. We should look to meet the demand and, as far as possible, to fulfil the choice that parents make for their children, because that is their right. However, because of the cost involved, we cannot go on closing schools in one sector and opening schools in another. We need some sort of rationalisation, and it is a matter for the Department to determine where we are going. It could be that the next generation, in addressing a new shortage, may seek to reopen schools that we have closed. Newtownbreda Primary School, for example, was closed four years ago, but the building is still there. Is reopening it an option? In the

integrated sector, newbuilds are going up, and we know that they attract pupils because we have seen that in Finaghy, Taughmonagh and outer south Belfast, and it is happening at St Ita's and St Joseph's. However, I understand that there is space at Cairnshill Primary School. There is not a lot of space, but it has some capacity, and I understand that the same applies to Carryduff Primary School in the controlled sector. I am sure that the Minister will know the details of that better than I do.

It seems to me that there is a wider question. Yes, we need to meet the immediate demand and provide choice for parents and families, but we also need to look at this in a more holistic way. What is happening in South Belfast could be repeated in a number of constituencies throughout Northern Ireland that have such a mismatch. When one sector of the population moves, that education sector decreases, and, at the same time, we are investing to build up another sector in order to meet the demand created by that shift in population. Clearly, that is not sustainable. Therefore, I am happy to support the motion, but the Minister and the Department have serious issues to address. I have no doubt that the Minister will need the wisdom of Solomon to address those issues in the years to come.

6.30 pm

Ms Lo: I thank Dr McDonnell for bringing this important issue to the House.

A number of constituents have contacted me for assistance with regard to the allocation of places at St Ita's Primary School. Parents were concerned about the prospect of being unsuccessful in getting a place in their first-choice school because of oversubscription in popular schools in south Belfast. It is no wonder that they are concerned; an article in the 'Belfast Telegraph' on 20 April claimed that almost 1,000 four-year-olds across Northern Ireland have missed out on their choice of primary school because of oversubscription. That also means that hundreds of pupils now face having to bypass their local schools. Obviously, another problem for parents is that collecting children for after-school childcare will be a big problem if they are going to be miles away from their home.

In schools such as St Ita's, even though it has increased its intake in recent years to accommodate increasing interest, oversubscription continues to grow and the school is unable to meet demand, year-on-year. I wrote to Minister O'Dowd to support a development proposal that would enable St

Ita's to expand and accommodate rising enrolment, and I tabled questions for written answer, asking the Minister to outline what action his Department intends to take to address the deficit in primary school places for children who are entering P1 in the Carryduff and Drumbo parish areas. The response that I received stated that the Department and relevant boards will work with parents to ensure that all children are allocated a place. It is not just a place that parents want; it is the school of their choice that they want, perhaps because it is close to their home or because they are attracted by its good reputation.

The CCMS response to my query about the problem with capacity at St Ita's was that, under open enrolment regulations, access to first preference schools is not guaranteed, but I am glad to learn that CCMS has commissioned further work to identify future trends in the parish and the wider area, which includes the potential to provide some additional accommodation.

There is an argument that, perhaps, part of the problem is that integrated schools have not been allowed to grow in the way that they should and that they are still being held back. I believe that Catholic parents might have opted to send their children to an integrated school had places been available. I recently heard from a couple in a mixed marriage that they were mightily disappointed that they could not get a place for their son in two integrated schools in Belfast because of oversubscription.

Recent surveys have clearly indicated that there is an increase in demand for integrated education and that there is still too much of a focus on established schools. The debate earlier today, as other Members said, highlighted how we have allowed three established schools to dwindle in another part of south Belfast to the point of necessary amalgamation. Would the solution not be that there should be more integrated schools to cater for all sections of our community?

Another problem is the lack of flexibility in the short term. Every once in a while there will be a spike in birth rates that will increase applications to schools, particularly the popular ones such as St Ita's. How does the Minister aim to ensure better flexibility in the future?

We talk about parental choice all the time. I can understand why parents feel aggrieved when they are being forced to accept schools that they have not chosen, because it has an impact on the type of education that they want for their children. If the Department of

Education paid more attention to developing trends in parental choice rather than sustaining the status quo, the benefits would be that choice is met and that schools could be rationalised in an organic way. There is a need for better forward planning and a bit more vision. There will be anomalies in numbers, but there appears to be a steady increase in applications to schools such as St Ita's. The Department needs to plan for that. I am very pleased to hear that St Ita's development proposal was accepted, but many are not.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I welcome the opportunity for the debate on provision in south Belfast. A number of Members covered points that I hope to address during my response. Many of the issues that Dr McDonnell raised are the very reason why I introduced area planning and primary school area planning. A number of Members, including Mr Maskey, touched on the need to plan going into the future and the need to take into account population growth and trends in these matters. That is why I have commissioned the Catholic Commission and the boards to bring forward plans that look into the future on how we provide primary school provision.

A number of Members referred to nursery school places. The Programme for Government commitment is to provide a preschool place, not necessarily a nursery school place. The community and voluntary sector and, indeed, the private sector provide the same curriculum in this area as nursery schools. People argue that parents want to get their children into a nursery school because that allows them to attend the primary school, but primary schools should not be using that as admissions criteria. That should not be the case. Members may well argue that we should increase nursery school provision at one school or another, but I then put it to Members: which of your community and voluntary groups that will no longer be able to provide preschool places would you like me to close down? Those are the alternatives in these matters. I am not aware of a specific issue in south Belfast in regard to the provision of nursery school places, but I will ask my officials to continue to investigate whether there is a particular hotspot of preschool places that we need to investigate further.

Clearly, an issue has arisen this year regarding primary-school placement in the area around the demand for places at St Ita's. The primary school draft area plans said that CCMS was making a development proposal, which it did in February 2012. I acted positively to that

development proposal and approved it, and that has helped to alleviate some of the pressures in the area. I am not saying that any of the schools in the immediate vicinity of St Ita's are automatically suitable for the children who wish to attend St Ita's, but I will give Members an idea of the provision in that wider area. Within three to four miles of St Ita's, there are five Catholic maintained primary schools. There is provision for 1,726 pupils at those schools, and there are 181 empty places. If I were to increase and continue to increase primary school provision in St Ita's, I would have to assure myself that other schools would not unduly suffer. We have to ensure that St Joseph's and St Bernard's, for instance, remain viable going into the future. Beyond that, within a three-to-four-mile radius, we have to ensure that St Michael's, Holy Rosary and St Bride's schools remain viable going onto the future. Therefore, it is not as simple as an equation of saying that we will increase provision at the school that is in front of me now and forget about everything else. We have to take into account the entire provision in the area.

Many Members referred to parental choice. The legislation actually refers to parental preference in this regard. Parents are asked to put down preferences on the application form. I can understand parents' desire to obtain a place in a school that may be their favourite school, and we do everything in our powers to facilitate them, but I am not aware of any public service where someone can be guaranteed access to a stated public service of their choice. Unfortunately, we cannot run public services in that way. I encourage the Members who are present to respond to the area planning process, particularly that for the South Belfast area, because that is the way forward in determining future educational provision in that area.

I have received correspondence from Dr McDonnell and Mr Maskey, who sought meetings with me to discuss future educational provision in the South Belfast area. I am happy to confirm that, as part of my deliberations on how we should move forward, I have had those meetings and have had discussions with elected representatives from the area. I will also say to Members that they should respond to the ongoing area planning process for that area.

There is little more to be said. Members have made known their views that there is an issue of particular concern in South Belfast, that there may not be enough primary school provision in that constituency and that it may be in the wrong place. Those matters will have to be

resolved. We have reacted to the development proposal, which is a medium-term plan for St Ita's. However, it may require redrafting once the area plans have been finalised.

I will say this to Members: when one school is lobbying you about increasing its enrolment numbers, ask yourselves what the effects of that may be on the other schools in the constituency. Take the judgement on that in the round. If it is the right thing to have one or two schools as a priority, so be it. However, every action has a reaction. When planning school numbers, if you react to the demands of one school, it may have a detrimental impact on another.

I hope that area planning will answer our concerns. We have certainly posed all those questions; we now have to establish the answers. Thank you very much.

Adjourned at 6.42 pm.



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