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They should be sent to:

The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.

Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 23 April 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I ask for your guidance on Standing Order 20A, as it affects today's proceedings. It deals with questions for urgent oral answer. I sought to table such a question this morning before 10.30 to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to ask if they retained confidence in the Attorney General. I was then informed by the Business Office that the question would not be taken, not because you had ruled that it was not urgent but because OFMDFM claimed to be unable to provide a Minister.

Standing Order 20A sets two criteria for admissibility. The question must be submitted before 10.30 am and the Ministers or Department must be given a minimum of four hours' notice. Nowhere does it suggest that a Minister can simply say that they are not available. There are four Ministers in OFMDFM. Can you confirm that that matter did not get to you for a decision and that someone in the Business Office took a decision that it would not be acceptable because OFMDFM claimed that a Minister was not available?

Mr Speaker: The Member will know that there is a clear convention around the issue. We normally check first to make sure that a Minister is available. On this occasion, a Minister was not available. If Ministers are not available to come to the House to answer the question for oral answer, we have to look at a different situation. I would have thought that the Member understood that. It has been practised over and over again. I suggest to the Member that he might resubmit his question for oral answer. That might be useful to the Member.

Mr Givan: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I had also tabled a question for the Justice Minister to answer orally about the same issue and got a response back to say that he would

not be answering, yet he appeared on 'Hearts and Minds' and was quite willing to talk about the case. I have been told that we cannot raise it in the House, even though that Minister is available to answer questions for oral answer, because he does not want to address it in the House. Mr Speaker, will you advise on what protection you will give to allow Members to express themselves in the House without fear of being brought before the courts by the Attorney General?

Mr Speaker: Let me reflect on what the Member has said, because I am not aware that he submitted a question for oral answer to the Justice Minister. Let me reflect and come back to the Member.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, these motions will be treated as business motions. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Tom Elliott replace Mr Basil McCrea as a member of the Committee for Justice; that Mr Tom Elliott replace Mr Danny Kinahan as a member of the Committee for the Environment; that Mr Danny Kinahan be appointed as a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister; that Mr Roy Beggs replace Mr Ross Hussey as a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel; that Mr Ross Hussey replace Mr Roy Beggs as a member of the Committee for Regional Development; that Mr John McCallister replace Mrs Sandra Overend as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee; and that Mrs Sandra Overend replace Mr John McCallister as a member of the Business Committee. — [Mr Swann.]

Resolved:

That Mr Sean Rogers replace Mr Conall McDevitt as a member of the Committee for Education; that Mr Conall McDevitt replace Mr Mark Durkan as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety; that Mr Patsy McGlone replace Dr Alasdair McDonnell as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; that Mr Patsy McGlone replace Mr Colum Eastwood as a member of the Committee for Justice; that Mr John Dallat replace Mr Joe Byrne as a member of the Committee for Regional Development; that Mrs Dolores Kelly replace Mr Patsy McGlone as a member of the Committee for the Environment; that Mr Dominic Bradley be appointed as a member of the Audit Committee; and that Mr Colum Eastwood replace Mr Patsy McGlone as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

Private Members' Business

Preschool Nursery Provision

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

Mrs Cochrane: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to take immediate action on the findings of the review of the preschool admissions arrangements and remove the July and August birthday admissions criterion for the 2013-14 academic year; and urges the Minister to prevent a repeat of the problems being faced this year in relation to the 2012-13 academic year, by ensuring that there are sufficient preschool places for all children in the required locations.

Members will know that the issue of preschool provision has been debated in the House on various occasions. Indeed, it was the topic of my maiden speech in June last year. Since then, I have written to the Minister; I have tried to meet him; and I have asked questions on the issue, not to try to catch him out or to score political points but simply to try to resolve what continues to be a serious problem in my constituency of East Belfast and, I understand, in various areas across Northern Ireland. I need not remind Members of the merits of preschool education, about which I think we all agree. Having seen the changes in my youngest daughter over the past seven months as she progresses through her preschool year, I have testament of that.

I was pleased when the Minister announced the review of the preschool admissions arrangements. However, a review is meaningless if action is not taken on its recommendations. Therefore, many of you will recall my delight when the Minister made his statement to the House in January this year on actions that he intended to take on the back of that review.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I am going to hold you to that. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Cochrane: I did not hear that.

Mr Lyttle: He says he is holding you to it.

Mrs Cochrane: This brings me to the reason for the debate. Let me quote a little from the Minister's statement:

"I have also identified some actions that I intend to progress immediately. The report confirms previous findings that the July/August birthdays admissions criterion can potentially disadvantage younger children in their preschool year. I intend to revoke that criterion in the 1999 regulations and remove it as a priority criterion for non-statutory providers."
— [Official Report, Vol 71, No 2, p81, col 2].

When I probed the Minister a little further, he said:

"I acknowledged that a lot of the report's actions will not come into effect this year. They will affect the programme of work for 2013-14." — [Official Report, Vol 71, No 2, p85, col 2].

He went on to say:

"The Member referred to the July/August birthday issue. I hope to deal with that in legislation connected to ESA ... If that is not felt to be the appropriate manner in which to address the issue, I will introduce separate legislation, but I am keen to remove that provision from the statute book." — [Official Report, Vol 71, No 2, p86, col 1].

In February, during Question Time, I asked the Minister whether the removal of the July/August criterion would happen in time for the 2013-14 intake. I explained that the admissions booklets would be produced in September of this year and so he really needed to act. He said that he would do it as quickly as possible. I am extremely dismayed, therefore, to hear from the Minister's officials that he wants to wait until he has something more appropriate in its place before he removes the priority criterion.

I understand that the social disadvantage criterion needs to be looked at in more detail and that it will be a more complicated change given that research shows that children from a socially disadvantaged background benefit more from a preschool experience than children from families who are not in receipt of income support or jobseeker's allowance. However, we could still ensure that those children receive a place; it just might not necessarily be their first preference.

Let us be clear: we have established that the July/August criterion is wrong and that, potentially, it disadvantages younger children who are in the same academic year.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: I would rather not at the minute. I have a number of points that I want to cover. If I have time at the end, I certainly will.

The Minister said that he would introduce separate legislation if the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) legislation was not in place quickly enough. Although the ESA legislation is progressing, it will not be complete in time. The Minister has the power to act now, and the parents want action.

I take this opportunity to comment on a few other findings of the review and actions that the Minister specifically referred to in his January statement. Have any steps been taken to ensure that the statistical data that is collected to inform local area planning will be improved? Has the Department even asked the education and library boards and the preschool education advisory groups for better data? The Belfast Board was trying to gather figures for this year on July and August birthdays, but it was struggling. Has the Department reviewed its policy on enrolment numbers to see whether greater flexibility can be introduced, for example, for time-limited extensions outside of a development proposal? That is particularly important for this year's intake, as it may allow some of the children who are without an offer to receive a place. However, I add a caveat: I have spoken to nursery principals who have suggested that the 13:1 ratio is already quite difficult, particularly at the start of a school year, when many children have very little independence.

Has there been any progress on area-based planning? I understand that the planning of places is particularly challenging, as there can be significant variations in numbers in a location each year. It is difficult, but it is not rocket science. I have been able to work proactively with preschool providers and the boards to try to alleviate problems in east Belfast. For example, additional sessions have been secured in St Colmcille's at Ballyhackamore. Area planning works only if you have in place criteria that prioritise the children who live in that area. Continuing to include the July/August birthday criterion will continue to allow children from elsewhere to displace children who live perhaps a few streets away. For example, in the current intake — I appreciate that it is still ongoing — some east Belfast nurseries have had to offer places to children who live in Conlig, Dunmurry

and Greenisland because they were born in July or August. That may suit their parent because of where they work or where a grandparent lives, but it is not fair and should not be allowed to continue.

I have done an analysis of the situation in my constituency. To be fair to the Minister, there has been an increase in the number of places over the past few years. A rough estimate shows that we are now short of places by approximately 10% when comparing P1 intakes over the past three years with the number of preschool places available. That 10% figure would be in line with the Department's suggestions that approximately 10% of parents do not want a place for their child or do not take up the offer of a place because it does not suit their personal circumstances. My experience is that parents do want a place. The personal circumstances for many of them are simply that they work and are unable to juggle to get children to a part-time session, especially an afternoon session. If that is their only choice because they have a job, that is hardly fair. The Department needs to take note of that when looking at the preschool admissions code in the future. Many parents cannot take up the offer of a part-time place because they need to juggle it with their working patterns. Often, that is not possible, no matter how hard they try. Not everyone can afford to pay £40 a day to place their child in a day care environment that can drop the child to a session at 12.15 pm and pick them up at 2.45 pm. That is just one example of what many parents face.

12.15 pm

Finally, I want to ask whether any improvements have been made to the application process, including the creation of a better communications strategy. I wrote an article for the 'Belfast Telegraph' last December to encourage parents to visit preschool settings and talk through the admissions criteria with individual providers. That might assist parents to make choices with positive outcomes. I trust that the letters of offer next year will not be sent out when the schools are closed for Easter. I spent most of recess talking to distressed parents who felt that they had nowhere else to turn for advice. The timing of the letters also put pressure on those working for the boards, who were inundated with calls.

The Department is taking positive steps but not quickly enough. Following an Alliance Party

proposal to amend the admissions procedure to make it a two-step process to give priority to children in their immediate preschool year over those in their penultimate year, the previous Minister made those changes, and they have made a difference. Minister, I ask you to take the next step now and remove the July/August criterion in time for the 2013-14 intake. Children are in their preschool year only once. In two years' time, they will be in primary 2, and fixing the problem then is just not good enough.

Mr Storey: I first want to make a few comments as the Chair of the Education Committee. I can inform the House that, because of concerns expressed by parents and from within the education system, the Committee has had to revisit this issue annually. The Committee has also had to revisit the 0-6 early years strategy or the lack of it. The Education Committee is considering whether it should initiate its own inquiry and will have further deliberations on Wednesday. The Committee is less than satisfied that the process of preschool admissions, set in the context of an early years strategy, is delivering to the best benefit of children and parents in Northern Ireland. I will return and inform the House on how the issue will be progressed.

I also want to make some comments as a Member. I am well aware that, over the weekend, Judith Cochrane's party leader, Mr Ford, warned her to be afraid of people like me. Maybe my colleagues and I are the big bad wolves and Judith Cochrane, Anna Lo, Chris Lyttle and Trevor Lunn are the four little Alliance Party piggies. I do not know whether that is the case as we debate the issue, but the Member has nothing to fear from Members on this side of the House.

The motion asks two things of the Education Minister. The first is that he take immediate action to remove the July/August birthday criterion, and I asked to intervene when the Member referred to that. We need to be absolutely sure that, in moving to remove the July/August anomaly, we do not disadvantage another set of parents. If you listened to 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, you will have heard from two teachers. One texted the programme to say that it was as a result of the July/August birthday criterion that a place had been accessed.

Mrs Cochrane: Thank you for giving way. I understand what you are saying, but getting rid of the July/August birthday criterion would not

create another set of disadvantaged parents. It would mean that children who are born between September and June would no longer be disadvantaged. That would create an equal playing field for all the children who should be going to preschool or school in the same academic year.

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

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for her intervention. However, we need to ensure that, as we move through any process in the House, the actions that we take do not disenfranchise another set of parents.

In his announcement of just a few weeks ago, on 17 January, the Minister said that his priority as Minister was:

“to create an education service that ensures that all our young people receive a high-quality education.”

He went on to say:

“That applies to preschool education in the same way as to any other sector.” — [Official Report, Vol 71, No2, p80, col 1].

The previous Education Minister said that this was an issue. In its preschool admissions review, the Department of Education said that this was an issue. We can go back as far as 2004, when the Department of Education identified this as an issue. Just in case there is still an issue with numeracy in the Department, let me tell you that we are now in 2012. Why is it that, annually, we come to this point with this issue?

I know that the Minister will stand up in the House today and tell us that £60 million has been spent and 24,000 children have been given the service. Yes, that is probably where we stand today. However, what about the 10% who have not received a place? What about those — the Member referred to this — in, for example, Hillsborough who have been offered a place in Newry? What about those who live in Ballymena and have been offered a place in Carrickfergus? Is that what we are honestly saying? Is the Minister prepared to do that, despite his and his party's view that a child should go to its nearest school? Remember, we get beaten over the head by the Minister on this issue: when it comes to post-primary provision, you should always go to your nearest school. However, when it comes to preschool, if you are aged 3, the

Department is happy to put you on a bus or in a car and allow you to travel 40 miles. Clearly, the Department has an issue.

What this debate will ensure is that, yet again, the genuine concerns of working parents are placed on record in the House. There are clearly concerns that the current process could become a disincentive for working parents. If we are trying to encourage people back into employment and to create an environment in which families can have a lifestyle that accommodates all their challenges and needs, clearly, this policy, as it is currently constructed, is not able to deliver.

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

Mr Storey: Finally, I say this: when will the Minister produce a 0-6 strategy? We wait, we wait —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Storey: — and we wait. The wait is nearly as long as that for admission to a preschool provision place.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members who tabled this motion. As the proposer of the motion said, similar motions have come before the House. That indicates how big an issue this is for parents. That has to be recognised. It also has to be recognised that the Minister has been very proactive on the issue. As was said, a review of procedures associated with the preschool programme was carried out. There is no doubt that that will continue to be a key priority for the Minister. The establishment of ESA will, of course, offer a changed context in which to take forward actions identified in the report. That should not restrict the Department from bringing —

Mr Storey: Could the Member explain to the House what will happen if we are ever to reach the point of being in the promised land of ESA, given that that is one organisation? If five organisations — the education and library boards — cannot sort out the problem through preschool education advisory groups (PEAGs), how does he envisage that a large authority like ESA would deal with the problem?

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

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The benefits of ESA are there for all to see. It has been agreed by the Executive.

The key is that we move the issue of ESA forward as quickly as possible, as the Member will understand. There is no doubt that the establishment of ESA is important in this context. It is important, too, for those employed by the boards, to remove the uncertainty that has been created around ESA. They want to see the issue move forward so that they can move on with their respective careers.

There is no doubt that the strategic planning of places is challenging. There are significant variations in the numbers and locations in a single year. The Department has indicated that it will look to the education and library boards, the preschool education advisory groups and, subsequently, ESA to improve the statistical data that is needed to inform area planning.

The overwhelming majority of applicants have been offered a place at a preschool setting that their parents identified as one of their preferences. However, we must continue to work to ensure that those without a place are allocated one. The key issue is ensuring that the spare places that exist are in the correct location, matching supply and demand. It is not reasonable in anyone's view to expect a parent to travel a considerable distance to access that pre-school provision. That is the challenge that the Minister has undertaken. I welcome the work that is under way to address that, and I am sure he will elaborate on the work that has taken place. Progress has been made. The two-stage admissions process introduced by the boards last year has helped to maximise the uptake of target-age children and increase choice for them. It is to be welcomed that the previous Minister brought that change about.

Departmental officials have been before the Committee many times about the issue. February was the last meeting at which they discussed this. At that meeting, they indicated that over 90% of need was being met in some areas, and in many areas 100% of need is being met. It is not an issue in those places. However, that should not take away from the fact that we should aim to have 100% coverage in this matter.

The January report indicated that the July/August admissions criterion can disadvantage younger children in their preschool year. The Department and Minister recognise that fact, and the Minister has indicated that he plans to revoke the criterion. I agree with the proposer of the motion that that should be acted on as soon

as possible and everything done to ensure that that is brought forward.

We in Sinn Féin support the motion absolutely and look forward to the Minister implementing the Programme for Government commitment on available places. That commitment was demonstrated by the significant investment that the Minister announced in this area in January. I have no doubt that that commitment will continue.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the challenge I have as Deputy Chair of the Committee and am very pleased to be there. I also welcome wholeheartedly the motion, although I regret it has even proved necessary. The Ulster Unionist Party fully supports the motion, and I congratulate the Members on bringing it forward.

The beginning of the motion calls for immediate action. That made me think that this institution is not very good at knowing what "immediate" is. The Collins dictionary says "occurring at once". This report brought forward 17 actions in mid-January, and we have seen nothing yet. Yet some of them seemed easy enough to put in place. I often wonder what happens to the actions after a report such as this comes out. Are the pens just put down and people take a break? I am sure that to produce those actions they must have knowledge and an idea of how they will put them in place. That is really what we ask for. We ask for those actions to be thought through, carried on and put in place quickly. I have been here two and three quarter years, and we continually see no sense of urgency. We rarely see target dates and timescales, so this is really a plea to every MLA and Department to let us look at how we can do things more quickly.

In the brief that was put together for us today, one little point was a member of the Department mentioning that politicians make the decisions. It was almost as if it was a cast-off remark: "It is not my job." We need everybody. If it is your role to write the briefs and advise Ministers, keep pushing them. It is our jobs as politicians and on the Committees to keep pushing them. Let us see things happen quickly. "Immediate" is, I think, a bit hopeful, but at least push for it.

The rest of the motion focuses really on two areas: revoking the criterion of July and August, which we wholeheartedly agree with, and looking at how we prevent the recurrence of the problems that happened again this Easter. I was told by

somebody yesterday that there are parents planning their children's births so that they happen during July, August and September. So, it is no longer a headache, it is "No. Think of the nursery places." But enough of the joke. In three or four years' time those children will be the ones for whom we will want to have got rid of this.

We must have action and give the groups a way forward. In my patch, in Carnmoney, there are three nurseries and 182 children's places, yet no place for a child with two working parents. That is why we have to review this matter. In Crumlin, the integrated school has a possibility of 24 places but was given only 10. There were 21 first preference applications that could have been taken, yet at St Joseph's there are 104 places.

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

So, again, we need to look at what we are doing and think it through. We are meant to be promoting integrated education, but we do not seem to be doing it in Crumlin.

12.30 pm

Mr Storey: The Member has hit on a very important point. Part of the difficulty is that the provision across Northern Ireland basically falls into two categories: provision in the maintained sector and a range of either controlled sector or voluntary and community sector provision. The point that he makes about the provision not being in any way integrated is a very valid one.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. I thank the Member for the intervention.

In Templepatrick and Parkgate, we had problems last year, and I assumed, not being on the Education Committee, that the Department would be resolving them. I spoke to somebody from the PEAG over the weekend who said that there has been no change in the numbers this year, so we have exactly the same problems arising. Yet, when I asked him what was behind the difficulties, he said the problem was funding. He said that a private nursery school gets less funding than a public one, which would initially seem fair. However, when you have to have one teacher for eight children, instead of one for every 13, it means that you need more money to fund the teachers. So, there is a matter that we need to resolve. He also said to me that if you look at the book 'Open Criteria', you will

see that they are anything but open. We need to review that to make sure that they are open.

So, the problems are funding, the regulation and the need for many more places, and we need to see action now. I am very pleased to be part of a Committee that will really look into the subject. The UUP supports the motion.

Mr McDevitt: I am very happy to support the motion, although it deals with just one symptom of the problem. It is a multifaceted problem that has many more symptoms, because while we discriminate against children born in July and August today, we will continue to discriminate against children of working parents in the future. That will remain the case as long as we have a policy that does not put a duty on the state to provide every child with a preschool and nursery place if their parents so want it.

I have read Sinn Féin's manifesto in which the party tells us that it will cherish equally all the children of Ireland. Yet, it is perpetuating, through its Minister of Education, a policy that is based on a fundamental inequality that, by definition, requires the state to discriminate against some children in order to be able to match the number of places against the demand for them. Where is the equality in that? Where is Sinn Féin's republicanism? Where is the commitment to transforming this nation and making it a better place for all our children?

I had a young mother come into my office last week. She is a very fortunate woman: she is a solicitor and her husband is a very qualified man. He gets on a plane every Monday morning at 6.30 am and flies to London to work, and he comes home on a Friday. He does that because he and his wife want to bring up their kids here in Ireland. They left London when their kids were born to rear them here, because here is the place they call home and here is a society they want to be part of rebuilding. Yet, she was coming in to tell me that there is no nursery place for her child in south Belfast. Why? It is because he was not born in July or August and his parents work.

I am the first to say that we should have policies that benefit those who need them most in our society. However, we do not need to have policies that tackle inequality if they just perpetuate another inequality. That is why this Minister needs to move from fiddling with a policy to bringing in a right — a human right — to a preschool or nursery education for every

child whose parents wish to avail themselves of that. For months, he has simply refused to entertain the possibility of doing so, and I do not understand why.

However, it does not really matter what I think, because parents do not understand why. They do not understand why, when we profess to be committed to transforming education and putting young children first — something I know Mr Rogers, who will make his speech later, feels passionately about — we continue basically to build a preschool and nursery system on a policy that discriminates and is built on inequality.

I agreed with the Chair of the Education Committee when he asked the very simple question: where is the 0-6 strategy? It is like everything else. It is like ESA, area-based planning, special educational needs (SEN) and God knows what else that has just been lost in some massive bureaucracy in the Department of Education.

I do not blame the Minister personally for all this. It is a difficult Department, and this is a very political issue. However, there are some things that the House does not disagree about. It does not disagree about the need to put young children first. All our manifestos commit us to doing that. So, why are we not working on that common ground and looking to improve the lot of those who have yet to enter formal education? You cannot build an education system that starts when children are four and finishes when they are 16 just because the law states that that is technically when education starts. You have to have the courage to move with the times. This policy does not belong in these times, and it will certainly not allow us to move with them.

I do not wish for any colleague to have to bring a similar motion to the House next year. What I wish is that we will be debating law that will allow every child aged three to have the right to a nursery or preschool place if their parents so wish.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is putting forward quite a strange position, given that some of his party colleagues would disagree with what he is saying about the current preschool policy. If you follow his logic through, is the SDLP now saying that we should do away with free school meals?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: There is no logic in what Mr McKay says, but what can I say about a man who took a whole three minutes to defend his Minister's position? In fact, that was a record. Mr McKay does not normally take more than two minutes to defend his Minister's position in the House, as that is all he needs to sink slowly into silence. The issue is that Mr McKay is promoting a policy that is based on and promotes inequality. This is not the same as free school meals at all. In fact, it is totally opposite to free school meals. The free school meals policy is built on rights. Every child has the right to be at school, and some children have the right to more support when they are in school. This policy does not even give every child the right to a place.

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

Mr McDevitt: Your Department is standing in the way of children having the right to a place. Get with the times and give them that right.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. This issue, which has been brought by the good Member on my right, underlines a deep-seated problem in our education system. If left unchecked, I firmly believe that that could isolate children and their families throughout Northern Ireland from their communities and society.

Three weeks ago, I met the Minister with my Lagan Valley colleagues to discuss this very issue and to put forward the plight of a number of families in Lagan Valley who have been forced to travel long distances outside their communities on a daily basis so that their children can access a preschool education. Indeed, it is worth noting that one family from Ballymacash in Lisburn was offered a preschool place in either Bangor or Newcastle. Many rural families in Dromore and Moira have also contacted me about being unable to access preschool education, as the number of available preschool places does not reflect the needs of my local community.

It is just unacceptable that a family who have lived in Lisburn or Dromore all their lives are being asked to travel approximately 60 miles a day to access preschool education. That creates an added financial burden and puts stresses and strains on the family unit, which we, as a Government, should not be placing on families, especially on this issue. The pandemic is just

not a phenomenon in Lagan Valley. Listening to other Members here today, it is clearly a trend throughout Northern Ireland, especially in our rural areas.

Due to the associated practicalities and costs, families are being forced to consider relocating outside their local community or to stop employment. Some are even having to consider relocating their children with other family members rather than be forced to spend up to three hours a day travelling to access their educational place.

Sadly, the issue does not stop there. As many Members may well be aware, the first criterion for places in most primary schools is that a child seeking entrance will have attended the local feeder preschool. This means that many children will be forced outside their community for most of their educational lives, and, for some, the problems of travelling, costs and relocation will remain a burden for the entirety of their school lives. That life cycle of being unable to access education in or close to your community can also cause mental and physical health issues for the parents, due to the unfavourable lifestyle choices that many could be faced with making. I ask the Minister to strongly consider the concept of changing the entrance cut-off point as a way of easing the numbers entering preschool for each academic year. Research has shown that if that criterion were adopted, it would create the necessary places. Although that may not be a long-term solution, the Assembly must act to ensure that no families are placed in the unnecessary position of having no control or other viable solutions other than to move away from their community and their support networks.

Access to education should not be based on the ability to travel, income or location. All children should be able to access preschool places in the community in which they live. As Members of this House, we should be able to provide the resources and direction to ensure that no family is faced with the problem that I have just mentioned in trying to get their child a preschool place. I welcome the debate and support the motion.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, thank the Member for bringing the motion to the House. I and my party support the motion. As the mover of the motion said, preschool education is important for a child's

development and learning in their early years. As every parent knows, as soon as our children are born, we tend to wish their lives away. We cannot wait until they say their first word, we cannot wait until they crawl, and we cannot wait until they walk. Indeed, it is in the first years of our children's lives that we start to think about where to send them for their preschool education. Many parents may decide to use a provider that other children in the family have gone to, or the one that is closest to their home, or, for many working parents, one that is close to their grandparents or childminders. Like many of my constituents, I was delighted with the Minister's announcement in January of the review of preschool admissions. The preschool admissions criteria have been a bone of contention for a long time, with many parents left feeling disadvantaged and that the criteria have let them down.

The Department's admissions criteria specify two priorities: children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, as we know, and four-year-olds with July/August birthdays, because they will not enter compulsory education until after their fifth birthday. As we know, that targeting process was part of the Department of Education's wider strategy to reduce the levels of underachievement in the long term, and it has been in operation since 1999. A child who fits the criteria will be given priority, wherever they live. In January, the Minister stated that the July/August criteria can disadvantage younger children in their preschool year, with many children losing out, and many parents being left frustrated and angry. Therefore, we welcome the review.

There has also been much debate over children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds being given priority. It seems to me that it has almost become a debate about children whose parents work and children whose parents are unemployed. Recently, there has been much conflict in that area in the media. One would almost be forgiven for thinking that there was a war brewing: parents who work versus parents who do not work. I do not wish to be responsible or to be a cheerleader for demonising the unemployed.

Other Members spoke about rural areas. The demand for preschool places in rural areas changes annually, and I believe that many providers get frustrated every year with the demand being higher than other years. That is an issue in rural areas.

12.45 pm

Many preschool providers set their own criteria, which can include a number of factors, such as proximity, sibling attendance for preschool or chronological age. Those criteria are at the discretion of the board of governors and the managing committee of the school or playgroup, and those, too, present problems in themselves.

Although the review has come too late for the 2012 intake, I ask the Minister to ensure that the recommendations of the review are brought forward. Sinn Féin will be supporting the motion.

Mr Craig: I, too, support the motion. When I was reading through the motion, I noted that it was 1999, I think, when there had last been a real overhaul of the preschool allocations criteria. This is not the first year, or even the second year, but the third year in which I have found myself in huge difficulties over the issue in my constituency. The simple truth is that there has been a lack of provision in the local area with regard to preschool allocation.

Minister, I will be honest: although I can understand something happening once, and even forgive someone for getting it wrong twice, I find it hard to believe that, with regard to my constituency, the Department and the boards can get it wrong for three years in a row. Clearly, there is some fundamental flaw in how the Department and boards are looking at the numbers that are being provided. I can never understand why that is the case, because the one thing that would be made available to the Department and the boards is the census figures and, obviously, the birth rates in localities. I, therefore, have difficulty in understanding why there is a mismatch between places available and the birth rates of children in a locality.

Some of the cases that are coming are very severe. Some parents are not even receiving a place for their child in their fourth choice preschool facility. Minister, that is something that is going to have a roll-on effect in our primary schools as well. This is the first year that I am getting an indication that that is the case in my constituency. This is the first year in the long number of years, maybe five or seven, in which this has been an issue that we are seeing classes in local primary schools being filled to capacity and children being turned away.

I appeal to the Minister: although we are looking at preschool places, the criteria that are being

used there and how places are allocated, think long and hard about the issue, because it has a roll-on effect on places and available capacity in our education system, even at primary school level. That will happen very quickly, as these children move on.

Among the criteria that seem to be causing huge difficulties for parents is the July/August birthday criterion. I know we have debated that issue to death in Committee, but there is a problem, regardless of whether your child ends up being one of the eldest in the class or one of the youngest. There will be underdevelopment or overdevelopment of the child. I have experience of that issue, at both ends of the scale, occurring in my family. One has developed very well, and the other has developmental problems, because of the age criterion and that month. If there was some flexibility around it between the education system and the parents, I think it would be an issue that could be fairly easily resolved.

We have targeted deprivation, and it is one of the key figures used when choosing, under the criteria now. I live in a constituency where there are, definitely, issues around the underachievement of people coming from deprived backgrounds. I fully recognise that fact, and I think that that is one of the tools that the Minister and his Department have used in the past to try to rectify the situation. What I will say, Minister, is that although it is a tool that may be used to rectify a situation, we have, as a Government, signed up to providing places for everyone. So I start to wonder whether that criterion is out of date. If we are going to provide preschool places for all children, do we still need that as a key criterion and marker within our schools? There should be provision for all, so I ask the Minister to review the criteria and have a serious look at how capacity matches birth rate in all localities.

Mrs Dobson: I support the motion. I also thank the Member for bringing it to the House and giving us the opportunity to debate an issue that is at the forefront of so many young parents' minds. Unmet need for funded nursery places has a devastating effect on parents and their children at this time every year. However, the damage that it will wreak on our young children will remain for generations to come.

As a newly elected MLA last June, I was honoured to make my maiden speech on the issue of nursery school provision. That was during a debate on an SDLP motion that called:

"on the Minister of Education to ensure that adequate nursery school provision is available for all children; to conduct an immediate review of current provision to ensure that unmet need in areas of high demand is addressed in advance of the next school year".

Although I am pleased that, since then, a Programme for Government commitment has been given to entitle every child whose parents want one to a funded preschool place, it does not take away from the fact that children are being turned down for places. Families and parents across Northern Ireland are being forced to make financial decisions because of being denied a place for their child. I know that all Members have cases in their constituency offices of anxious parents who feel totally let down by the system and who would desperately love to secure a nursery place for their child, but the fact remains that not enough places are available.

If we were to base the beginning of a child's academic life on privilege, there would quite rightly be uproar in the Chamber, but, in a way, we are doing that. If hard-working people are privileged enough to hold down a job while bringing up their child, the plain fact is that their child is less likely to secure a funded place at nursery school and, therefore, less likely to get the same start to their education journey as other children — children who may even have been born in the same hospital ward at the same time. Those children are missing out on the opportunity to take up the excellent provision and start in life that is offered by the dedicated staff at statutory, voluntary and community nursery schools across Northern Ireland.

I ask the Minister of Education to listen to the voices of hard-working people who are expressing disgust and anger — those are their words — at the present system for allocating funded preschool places in Northern Ireland. Will he give a commitment, in line with the Programme for Government, to review the process by which his Department gauges demand, numerically and geographically, for preschool places based on birth statistics and begin the process of strategically planning to meet future demand? We need to sweep away the injustice of working parents receiving letters in the post to say that their child has not been successful in securing a funded place.

The first rung on the ladder of the education system in Northern Ireland is broken, and parents and their children across Northern Ireland are

being disadvantaged because of it. Again, I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing it to the House to enable us to debate it and bring the views of our constituents to the Floor of the House. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response and the concrete steps that he intends to take to provide academic fairness for each and every child born in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As this is the first occasion on which the Assembly will hear from Sean Rogers, I remind the House that it is the convention that the maiden speech is heard without interruption.

Mr Rogers: I am honoured to represent the people of South Down, following in the footsteps of Margaret Ritchie, Eddie McGrady, P J Bradley and Éamonn O'Neill. I commend the work of Margaret, and I know that, as an MP, she will continue to deliver. I am particularly proud that I am the first nationalist in 50 years to come to the House from the kingdom of Mourne. I look forward to working with my colleague Karen and, indeed, all representatives of South Down, to ensure that all aspects of our constituency are well represented. I welcome Chris as the other new start from South Down.

It is with great pleasure that I deliver my maiden speech on what has been my vocation in life: education. As a parent and educationalist, I have had contact with children who have enjoyed an enriched learning experience from birth, and many who have not. Research tells us that the formative years in a child's life are the most crucial. Next to a secure and loving home environment, quality early years provision is one of the most important factors in a child's cognitive, language and social development. I pay tribute to all providers of preschool education: they do fantastic work.

We in the SDLP are fully committed to giving each child the best start on their educational journey. I note that there have been many debates on preschool education in the House. In 2006, the Department expressed its concerns in a report about social disadvantage criteria, and six years later, children from working families are still being discriminated against as they fail to access a nursery place. We cannot fix our education system until we get the foundations right. I can assure you that it is extremely difficult to address the deficit in numeracy and literacy at post-primary level. Early intervention is the key.

I wish to highlight the positive role that parents can play in their child's educational development. Parents need to be encouraged and supported in becoming engaged with education, right from the time of conception. It is encouraging to see some fathers getting involved, but there is a bit of room for improvement.

I recently attended a presentation by Sure Start at the first anniversary celebrations of the South Down family health initiative in my local area, where a young parent outlined how the parenting programme had helped her to bond with her child. Many of today's parents live in a pressure-cooker environment that is aggravated by social problems, the economic situation and family breakdown. They all need help to develop coping skills, and there needs to be better access to such programmes.

Sadly, we can no longer assume that good quality interaction takes place between parent and child. Unfortunately, technology has taken over. One young parent thought that she should read a bedtime story merely to get her child to sleep, but the parenting programme taught her the importance of positive interaction, which enhances attachment and language development. TV and other electronic devices cannot compensate for real interaction, just as standing on your Wii Fit in front of the TV is a poor substitute for a good walk in the Mournes.

There is no quick fix, but there is a strong economic argument that investment in early years would provide the biggest return for society. Our descendants will sit in the House and debate what we did and what we did not do. They will judge us harshly or be proud of our achievements. To reinvigorate our economy, we must get education right. It must be built on strong foundations and ensure a preschool place for every child, not just the older ones, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

I thank those who tabled the motion and support it fully. Let us have less talk and more action and make early years education a reality for every child. Let us put children first.

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

Mr Rogers: I commend my party colleague Conall for his work on the Education Committee, and as a new SDLP Member, I look forward to working with the Minister and the Committee.

1.00 pm

Mr Weir: Like others, I welcome the motion. However, I echo Mr Kinahan's remarks about the fact that, in many ways, it is a pity that we have to debate this ongoing issue. I cannot claim to have the same level of background as the Member for South Down who spoke previously, given the number of years that he has been involved in education. However, I suspect that I can claim to have longer involvement in dealing with the issue than most Members of the House. Fourteen or 15 years ago in what was then the Northern Ireland Forum, the Education Committee, of which I was a member, did a special report on preschool education. The current Chairman of the Education Committee was probably running around in short trousers then.

Mr Storey: I was at school.

Mr Weir: He was at school.

As part of that review, there was a clear acceptance that investment in early education was vital to the future of our children and, indeed, our country, because it does not just pay off in respect of providing educational dividends but plays a very important role in addressing a whole range of social problems and helping to prevent them. The report recommended that the Education Department should make available to every child at least one year's preschool education: that was a key finding of the report. To be fair, a certain amount of action was taken. However, if you look at the statistics, you will see that there has been very limited progress in the past 10 years, which is one of the problems. For example, in 1998-99, around 13,000 children received one year's preschool education. By 2001-02, that number had risen to 21,000. However, the number now is only 22,500.

For many, there is no real choice. There is a pretence of saying that every child that has the opportunity. In practice, parents whose children are refused a local place are having to choose between paying through the nose to send them to nursery school — indeed, I heard only last week of nursery schools charging £30 an hour for a private place — or sending them to one of the schools on the list from the local education board in which there are still places, which may involve a round trip of 20 miles, 30 miles, 40 miles or 50 miles. Under those circumstances, what real choice do people have?

Mr Craig said that some people in his constituency could not get their children into their fourth-choice school. Certainly this year and, indeed, over the past few years, a number of parents have come to me saying that they have filled in the form for all six local choices and have been refused places at all of them.

Steps were taken in the late 1990s to give some level of priority because there were a limited number of places. For example, priority was given to children with July and August birthdays and those experiencing social deprivation. Those steps might have had some merit at an early stage when there were a limited numbers of places. However, I think that those criteria are now very much out of date. I have to say that I have never favoured the idea of giving priority to those with July and August birthdays, because, as the proposer of the motion said, it does not create a level playing field for all children. Rather, it creates a situation where about one sixth of the population have an advantage over the rest on a very arbitrary basis. Mention has been made of the recommendation in the review to remove that criterion, and I would like to see that happen. I think that we have seen a lack of action. If the current provision is put in place, I do not want to see that inaction follow through to another year.

The criteria are causing widespread resentment among a lot of parents, because they think that the current system discriminates against working parents. Such parents see children who live quite a distance away going to their local nursery school, which they perhaps live just round the corner from and which they cannot get their child into because they are working parents. That is fundamentally wrong. We need a radical review of the implementation of admission arrangements. We need some strategic action. We also need a strategy to ensure that the mismatch between where the available places are and where the demand is is properly tackled. It strikes me that if we reach a situation where people genuinely have the choice and are able to get their children into nursery schools —

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

Mr Weir: — I suspect that some of the tensions, particularly those between working parents and

people who are socially disadvantaged, can be dissipated and removed. I support the motion.

Mr Allister: I want to begin by congratulating Mr Rogers on his maiden speech in the House. It was thoughtful and delivered in a manner that indicates that he will, undoubtedly, make a significant contribution to the House. As my speech follows his, it is right that I congratulate him sincerely on his contribution.

Some of us might have been forgiven for thinking that the matter of preschool nursery provision was resolved or going to be resolved, when we think back to the day when the proposer of the motion, Mrs Cochrane, threatened amorous demonstrations towards the Minister. Of course, it turned out to be yet another false dawn as far as the Minister is concerned. The promise that many people thought was in his statement turned out not to be there at all. We are, therefore, still on the long finger as far as that matter is concerned.

The issue needs to be addressed. Its many dimensions have long been crying out to be addressed. One of those dimensions is the disparity of provision across the Province. The very fact that people are offered a place does not mean that they have one. If someone is offered a place that is a 20-mile round trip or further away, that says that, in some areas, there is over-provision — otherwise they would not be able to offer provision to outsiders, so to speak. It is no provision for those who are asked to travel because it is unrealistic and utterly unsuitable for children of that age. Therefore, for the Minister to say that there are enough places is not the answer if they are not in the right place. That problem has yet to be addressed. It is a particular problem in some rural communities.

An even greater and overriding concern that is yet to be addressed is the inequality in provision. Preschool provision is vital in so many ways. It is vital to the child, the family unit and the working family unit. The section of society that is probably most discriminated against with regard to that provision is the working family unit, due to the prioritisation of places for those who do not work. Those who sit at home on benefits and are available all day to be with their children are getting places in advance of those who also want places for their children, are anxious to do their best for their them and, therefore, go out to work so that they can

provide the best for them. They find that they cannot get places other than at extortionate prices in some private facilities.

A further area that undoubtedly needs attention is ensuring that there is adequate provision in many rural areas. I have declared previously and will do so again that I have an interest as chairman of the board of governors of Moorfields Primary School. It is a rural school that serves a hinterland that does not have adequate preschool provision or a preschool unit, as many other schools do. Parents in that scattered rural community have to send their children to private facilities, in the main, which are inconveniently located. If we are to address that issue seriously, we need to do so through state provision as well. If we are not to move towards giving preschool children the right to a place, at the very least, we need to ensure that the network of schools is adequately provided with preschool units. Certainly, in the case of Moorfields Primary School, that has been a longstanding demand that has, so far, gone unmet. I trust that, by raising it again, it will, one day, fall on the ears of those who need to act.

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

Mr Allister: Then, that provision will, indeed, be met.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an deis freagairt ar dhíospóireacht an lae inniu, agus beidh mé ag iarraidh roinnt ceisteanna atá ag déanamh imní do Chomhaltaí a fhreagairt. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate, in which Members highlighted issues of concern. I recognise that some genuine concerns were raised following what I emphasise is only the first stage of the application process. However, I will not join in the chorus of demonisation conducted by some Members, led today by the SDLP and Mr Allister, alongside media commentators, of those who, through no fault of their own, find themselves on benefits. Let us make it clear —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Let us make it clear: there are many hard-working people —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has indicated that he is not giving way.

Mr O'Dowd: For the assistance of a smooth debate, I will not be giving way to anyone. I have a speech to make.

Mrs Dobson also referred to hard-working parents. I know many hard-working parents who are currently unemployed through no fault of their own. In case some Members have not heard, there is a recession on. People are becoming unemployed who never thought that they would be unemployed, and it is wrong of Members to demonise them.

Let us face the facts. The preschool admission process is ongoing. Stage 1 of the process ended on March 30 and stage 2 ends on 1 June. Ninety-four per cent of applicants, all in their final preschool year, have been offered a place in a setting that their parents identified in their list of preferences. This is a significant level of success for the programme, which attracted 22,800 applications from January 2012. Furthermore, of those placed, some 84% have secured a place in their first preference setting. The reality is that the vast majority of children have already been allocated a place in a setting of their choice.

Nevertheless, as I stated, I understand the genuine concerns expressed by some Members and experienced by some parents whose children are unplaced at the end of stage 1. There are 1,429 children without a place at this time. Although 1,742 places remain available across the education and library board areas, I fully recognise that not all those places may be in the right location to meet the demand. I have never been on record as saying that the offer is right in all places. I am determined, however, that we will move quickly to deliver the Programme for Government commitment to provide places for all who want them.

Steps have already been taken by the boards to address the need for additional places. I have brought in new providers to meet the shortfall in some areas, and other requests for new providers are being examined with a mind to bring them on board this year. Some existing providers are offering new additional sessions. Last week, ahead of the motion being tabled, I had already tasked my officials to meet the boards as a matter of urgency and to report back to me on the scope for additional early actions to more closely align supply and demand by September. That meeting will take place on Thursday of this week.

In considering any workable proposals that are put before me, I will operate in a flexible and imaginative manner within the current legislative framework. In order to improve this year's processes, I took a series of steps, again, before today's motion was tabled and before the media attention.

In light of Mr Kinahan's comments, based on information from his source in one of the PEAGs, I suggest that he gets a new source, because his information is not correct. Earlier this year, I invested a further £1.2 million to increase the number of preschool places available in the voluntary private sector. I recently approved development proposals that will increase preschool places in statutory settings by 130. Again, in response to Mr Weir's comment that little has changed over 10 years, the figures suggest that things are much different.

In the past two years, the number of new statutory places has increased by 442 with the establishment of 17 new nursery units. A total of 29 additional voluntary private providers offering 404 funded preschool places have come into the preschool education expansion programme in the past two years. In addition, there was an increase in the number of funded places allocated to voluntary private sector settings that were already participating in the scheme.

Overall, the number of funded places in the voluntary private sector has increased by 1,405 between 2009-2010 and the current year. That is not a sector standing still; that is a sector increasing its capacity to meet demand.

1.15 pm

Members will be aware that I have been reviewing the education budget, and, as a result, I am in a position today to make an announcement of further additional funding for preschool and early years. Today, I am allocating a further £1.4 million. That fund will be available for additional preschool places. Over the past two years, additional funds have made available to voluntary and private providers on a year-by-year basis. Today, I announce that that additional funding will now be recurrent. A total of £1.3 million will be made available on a recurring basis to voluntary and private providers to further close the funding gap between statutory and other sectors. That was one area of concern, Mr Kinahan, that your source had right. We do need to close the gap, and the funding that I have announced today will assist in doing that.

In addition, I plan to extend Sure Start coverage to the 25% most disadvantaged areas. This will cost a further £1 million, rising to £2 million by 2014-15. If more investment is needed, I will look at it urgently. The funding that I have outlined today amounts to almost an additional £6 million towards early years and preschool education. That is proof, if proof were needed, that I and my Department are serious about preschool education and determined to meet our Programme for Government targets.

Concerns have been raised about the process of the allocation of places, and I wish to emphasise a couple of points. No child is offered a setting for which the parent has not submitted an application. Places are only offered on the basis of parental preference. I emphasise "parental preference", not "parental choice". There is a distinct difference. At the end of stage one, parents are advised of all of the settings where places are still available in a board area. Clearly, these cover a wide geographic area, but I make it clear that I do not consider a suitable preschool place to be one where a parent and child are expected to travel long distances.

Finally, my focus is on the provision of a year's quality preschool education. At times, there appears to be a perception in some quarters that we are providing childcare. I am the Minister of Education, not the Minister of childcare. Although I fully accept that preschool, like school, assists in the planning of a child's care arrangements, that is not its primary purpose. We do not send children to primary school to assist parents in their childcare. Children are sent to primary school for the benefit of the child and their education. We send children to preschool for the benefit of the child and that child's education. Parents should be aware in submitting an application that they are advised to select preferences in a number of statutory and voluntary private settings in the programme as it is not always possible to meet parents' first preferences. Members should note again that it is a preference, not a choice. Inevitably, some settings will be more popular than others. Parents who do not identify a full range of preferences across the sectors will limit their options, as it reduces the number of settings that may be able to be offered to them.

I turn to the entrance criteria that are used by my Department. The Department currently specifies two priorities: social disadvantage and four-year-olds with July and August birthdays.

Schools and preschool settings will then set their own criteria to select children down to the last available place where too many children apply. The social disadvantage criterion was introduced as part of the Department's wider efforts to tackle educational underachievement.

I am surprised by Mr McDevitt's contribution. He claimed that we are discriminating against working parents. Has the Member never heard of positive discrimination being used to alleviate disadvantage —

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: — or to rectify inequality? From his comments, it appears that he does not. I understand that Mr McDevitt is moving over to the health brief for the party.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Will he be telling people from poor, disadvantaged backgrounds, who, as studies show, suffer the worst health outcomes, that it is their fault? He appears to be telling people from poor, disadvantaged backgrounds that their educational outcomes are their fault.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Minister give way? Let me answer that.

Mr O'Dowd: The state —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has the Floor. I ask that all remarks be made through the Chair.

Mr O'Dowd: The state has a duty to ensure that it uses whatever mechanisms possible to tackle social disadvantage. This clause is about tackling social disadvantage, and, again, I emphasise that the demonising of people who currently find themselves in unemployment is totally unacceptable.

The principle of retaining the social clause criterion has been queried, and there have been suggestions that this can disadvantage working parents. That is a false argument. We have to achieve coverage across the North and make places available to all parents. The argument about working and non-working parents is a distraction but is one that I will not be distracted by.

The Programme for Government also insists that we challenge underachievement in such circumstances. I intend to meet that target. The continued use of those two priority criteria was considered as part of the review of preschool admission arrangements, which concluded that

the definition of social advantage needs to be reviewed and brought up to date. That will have to wait for the outcome of the Executive's deliberations on universal credit.

The debate raised the issue of the July/August birthdays as a priority criterion. At no time during Mrs Cochrane's contribution to the debate did I think that she was point scoring. I believe that the Member is genuine about the matter. I am not sure where the officials briefed her that I am awaiting a better opportunity, and I cannot remember the exact term that you used, but I would like to inform the House that I will have the legislation that is necessary to remove those criteria with the Assembly before the summer recess. It can wait no longer. I had hoped that the other legislative vehicles would be there, but they are not available to me at the minute.

Earlier this year I announced the outcome of the review of preschool admissions arrangements. That will introduce changes to improve the system for children and parents and will impact on policy and practice. Implementation of key elements of the review will be taken into account in considering the steps that need to be taken to deliver the Programme for Government commitment. Some aspects of the review will also be considered as part of the early years strategy. Members rightly asked, "Where is the early years strategy?" I will announce the outcome of that to the Assembly before the summer recess.

As I indicated, the preschool admissions process is still under way and places are still available. My Department, working with the board, will make further places available in areas where demand cannot currently be met and to all providers in areas that are oversubscribed. The preschool programme is referenced in the Programme for Government, and there is work to be done to meet the commitment of ensuring that a place is available for every child whose parents want it. I have asked officials to consider what further steps need to be taken to strengthen and invest in the Programme for Government in the long term.

Already today, I have announced almost £6 million of additional funding towards preschool and early years. In the immediate future, I am prepared to be creative and flexible in finding solutions to address any problems in placing those children who have not yet received a place. That work continues.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the commitments that he outlined, and I thank everyone who made contributions to the debate. There are clear commitments in the Programme for Government on preschool provision, and those are the frameworks around which we can address concerns about social disadvantage and, indeed, the July/August birthday issue. I give a wholehearted welcome to the news today that answers the call that we made in our motion. For the sake of child development, it is important that local preschool places are guaranteed, and the longer that it takes to resolve all the issues with that matter, the longer we will fail families across Northern Ireland in all our constituencies.

I put on record my thanks to my Alliance Party colleague Judith Cochrane for putting the issue on the Assembly agenda today to engage the Minister on and press him into action on delivery for nursery places for our children. I also thank her for all the work that she has done to promote the practical steps that can be taken to move us towards the goal of locally based preschool places for all our children.

I will move on to Members' contributions, starting with that of Mervyn Storey, the Chairperson of the Education Committee. He recognised a lot of the challenges with the issue and chose to take an opportunity to have a pop at us for proposing the motion. He likened us to little piggies and the DUP to big bad wolves. On this issue, it looks as though he is more of a sheep in wolf's clothing when it comes to holding the Minister to account, but we welcome his contribution nonetheless.

Mr McKay MLA recognised that it was hoped that ESA would be the legislative vehicle through which some of the criteria that were causing problems could be removed. Indeed, the target set for delivery of that legislation was 2009. It is regrettable that that has taken so long to come forward, but, again, we welcome the Minister's action to move with other legislation to deal with some of the issues in lieu of that. He also advocated for 100% coverage in the provision of nursery places, and we agree with that also.

Danny Kinahan called for immediate action and acknowledged that this House does not have a reputation for such. Hopefully, we will be able to work together to act much more quickly on all the outstanding items in relation to nursery

provision. Conall McDevitt, rightly, acknowledged that we are looking today at the symptoms of a wider problem and that we need to resolve the confusion that reigns among many parents with regard to more widespread nursery provision.

Brenda Hale acknowledged that this is a Northern Ireland-wide problem, especially in rural areas and to such an extent that families consider relocating or stopping work in order to overcome difficulties in this area. Michaela Boyle, rightly, acknowledged that, according to reports and research, July and August birthdays are a disadvantage to many people. However, she cautioned against creating conflict between working parents and those who are not currently in employment. I agree with that as well.

Jonathan Craig called for the better use of birth rate data to overcome the problems. That is certainly something that we have been calling for from the Minister, and we welcome his commitment today to look into that area. Jo-Anne Dobson, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, represented the many parents who feel let down by the current system and called on us to listen to their voices. Hopefully, the Minister is showing that he is starting to do that. Jo-Anne also called for the better use of data and informed area planning, which is essential to making further progress.

Sean Rogers made his first contribution to the House, and I congratulate him on his appointment to the Assembly. I wish him well in all his work for the people of South Down, whether it is on Wii Fit issues or walking in the Mourne. You are very welcome indeed. Your unique contribution referenced the importance of high-quality early years provision and the importance of recognising the hard work of all staff in preschool education but also —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Yes; I am happy to do so.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member. I will take off my disguise and not be a sheep in wolf's clothing. On that point about high-quality provision, we heard the Minister, who, unfortunately, was not prepared to take any interventions today, say that he is allocating an additional £1.4 million. Does the Member agree that there is a serious issue that has to be addressed to get to the point of high-quality provision, given that the chief inspector said that:

"the highest percentage of good to outstanding practice remained within the statutory nursery schools"?

There is no quality assurance and there are no guaranteed outcomes in relation to the money that has been announced today.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is good to see a robust intervention being made about the Minister's contribution. We absolutely need to upskill those in all sectors of nursery provision. That is also a way that we can help to overcome some of the shortages in statutory provision. We heard from Sean Rogers about the importance of positive parental interaction with children as well. That is essential to their development, and it is an economic imperative for wider society to have less talk and more action on this issue, and rightly so.

Peter Weir acknowledged that the July/August criterion was particularly arbitrary, and he recognised a need for all parents to have better local access to provision. Jim Allister referred to my colleague's profession of amorous demonstrations to the Minister if he were to make progress on these issues. I fear the scenes that we might be met with later today. I look forward to that — more so than my colleague, perhaps. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister also recognised a wider disparity of provision that needs to be overcome. He said that everyone needs to have access to a place and that we are making unrealistic expectations of many parents, particularly those in rural communities, as regards travel. However, I urge Mr Allister to avoid falsely setting socially disadvantaged children in conflict with others. Nevertheless, I agree with him that widespread provision is the framework that will overcome that type of conflict and confusion.

We welcome the announcements made by the Minister of Education about investment and taking the action that is needed to make the application criteria more balanced.

He rightly acknowledged, however, that we have many children across Northern Ireland who are unplaced at stage 1 of the application process and recognised that many of the places on offer are not in the right location for families. I welcome his commitment to better address the supply and demand issues relating to nursery provision and his willingness to improve the application process in general.

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

I ask the Minister whether we will see improvements in the way in which data is collected and around the communication strategy. There is a real challenge on our hands to make sure that we help parents to better understand how to list preferences and to understand the criteria that apply to their application process.

1.30 pm

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that he has touched on the nub of it in terms of how data is collected. In conversation with senior educationalists in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, I became aware, a couple of months ago, that several hundred places were going to be oversubscribed. You cannot put nine pints into a gallon drum. It is essential that we have the adequate number of spaces and that that preparation is put in place. That is where the nub of the problem exists. It is in certain areas.

Mr Lyttle: Absolutely. We really need to see better area-based planning in action. We would like to know from the Minister if there is more flexibility around enrolment numbers for limited extensions outside the development process, which is particularly important for people who have been let down by the area-planning and have oversubscription in their area.

In closing, I urge the House, the MLAs who have supported the motion, members of the public, families who are affected by the issue and the media to make preschool provision for our children a critical issue for the Executive and the Minister, to prove that this is an institution that is capable of delivering on real issues for local people. The Executive, the Minister and the Assembly would do well to realise that members of the community care more about these issues than issues such as, for example, what flag we fly on the top of this building.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Lyttle: They care more about whether their children will receive access to the education that they deserve. Those are the issues on which the Assembly should be working and, indeed, should be judged.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to take immediate action on the findings of the review of the preschool admissions arrangements and remove the July and August birthday admissions criterion for the 2013-14 academic year; and urges the Minister to prevent a repeat of the problems being faced this year in relation to the 2012-13 academic year, by ensuring that there are sufficient preschool places for all children in the required locations.

Multiagency Support Teams

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

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the success of the multiagency support teams and equivalent bodies in detecting and addressing problems which children may experience in the early stages of their education; recognises the effective partnerships that are in place between the health service, schools and parents to address the needs of children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work closely with the Minister of Education to review the model of service provision and expand the service to the schools and nurseries which are not currently part of the scheme.

I am very pleased to move the motion. I declare an interest as a founding member of the Carrickfergus Children and Young People's Partnership, now perhaps known as a locality group, and also of Horizon Sure Start, which operates in Larne and Carrickfergus. In both those organisations, the issue of how health and education are intertwined is central. It is clear how education is important to address health issues on occasion and how it is important that health issues that a child might have are addressed in order that they can progress in their education.

The importance of early intervention has been widely recognised internationally and, increasingly, locally. I think of the Nobel prize-winning economist Professor James Heckman, who recognised that addressing issues at the earliest stage so that people can progress and become productive citizens benefits not only the individual, family and society but brings a bottom-line benefit to the economy. I also recall hearing Scotland's Chief Medical Officer, Harry Barnes, during a seminar on Northern Ireland held by the Northern Investing for Health Partnership, recognise the importance of education in trying to address health inequalities. So the two issues are clearly intertwined. Health inequality can cause problems to our young children, and equally, as I said, if there are problems with education, there are problems in getting across health

messages. Education has a role to play if we want to improve our society's health by encouraging healthy eating, improving exercise levels and ensuring that people have resilience against drug and alcohol misuse.

Historically, Northern Ireland Departments operated largely in silos. The Education Department was responsible for schools and the Health Department for hospitals. Thankfully, with the recognition by each Department of its importance to the other, they now cross over. I recall that the first Assembly had a funding package for children and young people to encourage cross-departmental working, and, when devolution was removed, that type of funding continued under the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Multiagency working was one of the important schemes to be established.

In my area, the body currently operated by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust is known as the multiagency support team for schools (MASTS), which is important because it addresses a range of issues that may include speech and language issues; communication needs; emotional, social or behavioural needs; and sensory, motor or perceptual needs. However, specifically, there must be two or more issues before the multiagency team will get involved. If there is a single issue, the single professional can deal with it, but one form of need frequently triggers other issues and other complex needs that must be addressed. That is the beauty of the multiagency team, which includes speech and language therapy, behavioural therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, clinical psychology, specialist language teachers — certainly in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area — therapy assistant support and, indeed, clerical support for it all to work. It is also important that one of the scheme's aims is to give nursery and primary school staff the confidence and knowledge to identify and meet the needs of children with difficulties in the areas that I mentioned. So it has brought about improvement in the close working and abilities of teachers and, ultimately, the headmaster, to whom issues must be referred when assistance has to be brought in.

Parents of children with special needs must have considerable determination to work their way through our system. It means working through your GP, perhaps travelling some distance to see a consultant, and perhaps getting referred on again. Not every parent has

the ability, determination or the means to travel outside their area to have their child's special needs addressed through the system. Through my involvement in Horizon Sure Start, I have met parents whose children had speech and language issues that had not previously been addressed. However, staff had identified such issues, the need was addressed and resources were brought in so that those children would be much more ready to start their primary school education.

Sure Start schemes operate in tightly defined geographical areas, and not every parent of a child who is entitled to attend engages with it and brings them along. The beauty of our primary school system is that there is a statutory requirement to attend school, which means that every child must go. It is important that that statutory service integrates with other services and catches any child who may have been missed at an earlier stage.

The various multiagency teams have different names. As I said, there is the MASTS team in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area. In the Belfast area, there is the children's interdisciplinary schools team (CIST). In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area, there is the additional support for children in education team (ASCET). In the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, we have action for children in education (ACE), and, in the west, we have the western education support team (WEST). A range of teams carries out similar duties in different areas. It is an important opportunity to pick up issues and address them at that early stage in primary school.

As I said, my knowledge has been built largely in my area. I am aware that there are teams elsewhere, but I will draw on the knowledge that I have gained locally. Every child must attend primary school, and teachers have a vital role and must be given the training and the network to bring in that extra support. They, too, can even work in a classroom; it is not always left to the professionals. However, under the guidance of a professional, issues can be addressed so that children are better able to benefit from their education.

One of the scheme's benefits is its multidisciplinary nature. A range of issues can be dealt with by using a child-centred approach. I will demonstrate how one issue can frequently trigger others. What if a child has a speech and language

problem and arrives at primary school? They are not able to communicate well with their teacher, and they may not integrate with the rest of the classroom. They are likely to have behavioural problems that will flow from that. They might be very withdrawn or disruptive, which, ultimately, will affect other children in the classroom. So, because there is a fundamental problem, other problems can arise. The beauty of the scheme is that it can bring in the professionals required to help the child and the family to overcome the difficulties and benefit from education.

I would like the multiagency support team to be available for every child in not only my constituency but Northern Ireland. I understand that, in the Northern Trust area, 46% of schools are not covered by the scheme; the support is not there. In the Carrickfergus area of my constituency, five of the 13 primary schools are not supported; in the Newtownabbey area, 13 of the 35 primary schools are not supported; and, in the Larne area, 17 of the 18 primary schools are not supported. There is a huge gap in the system in that children are not being helped. It was largely based on whether the schools were proactive and volunteered to join the scheme when it was introduced originally. I am aware that a lot more would wish to join the scheme now.

Feedback on the scheme from parents, teachers and children has been very positive: 78% of principals and 69% of teachers highlighted that the children benefited from the intervention of the MASTS service; 95% of parents and carers highlighted that the children benefited from the support; and 92% of the children who have been interviewed indicated that they would recommend it. The effectiveness has also been recognised by the achievement of national, regional and local awards. I am aware that the benefits that can come from the scheme can help our children to get their foot on the educational ladder.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Beggs: It is vital that we bring in the scheme and allow all our children to benefit so that no one will slip through the gaps in our system.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for East Antrim Mr Beggs for raising the issue. The fact that this is the first that time many of us have become aware of the service indicates that it has been a considerable success rather than a failure. I have been an MLA or in local government

politics for about 31 years, and I often say that any service about which no complaints have crossed my desk after 31 years must be doing a good job.

The fact is that the multiagency, multidisciplinary teams have been working together since 2007 with little complaint. Indeed, from what Mr Beggs has told us, the glowing references that they have received seem to indicate that we have actually got something right. The teams have worked quietly behind the scenes to deliver a first-class service to our young children, and it is an excellent example of co-operation between two Departments. The accusation is always thrown at the Assembly that we work in silos and are blinkered to the needs of particular Departments. However, here we have the two huge Departments — Health and Education — working extremely effectively together to produce first-class outcomes.

1.45 pm

We all know that, in the early development of our children, it is absolutely crucial that we identify any particular needs. Early intervention works and produces outstanding results. I have to declare an interest, as my daughter had a speech and language problem. You may be surprised that any Wells would have a speech and language problem, but she had an early difficulty, and we greatly valued the early intervention that gave her help and speech therapy. She has never looked back, and, some day, she may be as quiet and retiring as her father. We appreciated the speed and expertise with which the Department intervened. Time and again, it has been shown that early interventions work.

If I have one criticism about the present service it is that the presence of five different services with five different names that deliver almost the same provision is extremely confusing for parents. That is particularly so for parents who live on the borders of trust areas. It might be worth those who are involved in that essential service getting together and forming a more coherent image so that parents can identify what is delivered. That is by no means to demean the work that is carried out; however, it is strange that we have managed to come up with five totally different names for the same service in Northern Ireland.

I want to raise one concern. This time last year, the Royal College of Speech and Language

Therapists pointed out to me that the funding for a service that operated in County Down and allowed for early intervention to be provided to young children through a qualified speech and language therapist had been withdrawn. That was despite the outcomes from that service being amazing, with children who came to school with extreme difficulties in speaking moving on enormously by the end of that special one-on-one provision. That shows the stresses and strains that the Department is under.

Mr Beggs pointed out that not all schools avail themselves of the service and that 46% of schools are not covered. I understand that to extend the service to all schools would require resources in the region of £1 million, which in normal times may not have been a difficulty. However, much of that money would have to come from the Health Department, which is under incredible stress in providing a huge range of services from home help to brain surgery. It is becoming more and more difficult to find money to maintain the present provision, never mind expanding a service beyond its present boundaries, and we need to bear that in mind. We have a constant Wailing Wall in the Assembly, with MLAs coming forward to demand additional provision. That money has to come from somewhere, and it will cause considerable difficulties.

There is an opportunity coming up in the form of the autism strategy included in the private Member's Bill that was sponsored by Mr Bradley and passed by the Assembly in March last year. That will cause all Departments — not just Health and Education — to focus on children with specific needs, and it might provide an opportunity to expand the service. That having been said, a lot has been achieved with minimal funding. I know that the Minister is supportive of the need to expand provision further in Northern Ireland, and I urge him to do so.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. As parents, we want our children to have the best start in life, and as parents and guardians we do what we can to ensure that our children have emotional stability and guidance. Setting the right foundation for our children is of the utmost importance, as it improves long-term prospects and life chances for our children that they can, in turn, pass on to their children. Unfortunately, not all children get the best start in life, and that is down to many reasons.

The work that the multiagency support teams do is vital to schools and families in helping to address the problems that some children experience early in life. The work of Sure Start, which has been mentioned, in engaging with parents to help their child to develop through play and learning and the contribution that Sure Start makes in many communities must be recognised and supported. Such is the demand for the services of Sure Start in the areas of emotional, behaviour and communication difficulties that there are long waiting lists. It is key that children get access to services at the point of need so that support is given to the individual. Early detection and intervention are key to long-term outcomes.

The referral criteria for support also need to be looked at. Many children lose out on support not due to the process of referral or any fault of the service providers but because many children have such complex needs that responsibility falls across Departments. I support the motion in that the current model of service provision needs to be reviewed so that those who need expert help have quicker access to services.

Partnerships and services are widely available across all boards. The western education support team (WEST) in my board area provides support to schools and families, ensuring that every child gets the help that they need. It provides outreach programmes to schools and homes for children aged from three to eight years, for those experiencing difficulties in speech and language and for those with sensory, motor skill or emotional behaviour problems. The support given is time-limited intervention up to a maximum of eight weeks, depending on a child's needs. There is evidence that children benefit from that service.

The Western Trust also provides a valuable range of services for disabled children and young people with a learning and physical disability to help them to live life to the fullest. There are also many crèches and after-school clubs in our communities, and we need to recognise that there are always ways to develop and expand the models of service provision. The sharing of information across Departments is key to that.

New strategies between Health and Education need to be further explored so that those at the front line can provide the expertise and knowledge to those in need. Greater co-

operation between Departments and agencies to deliver more effective and integrated services also needs to be looked at, adding to the good services already provided by the majority of providers. Key to the debate is making sure that parents are aware that there is help and support out there and available to all families. Sinn Féin will support the review of the model of service provision to expand the service to schools and nurseries not in the scheme.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support the motion, which aims to review and expand service provision for children and young people who may experience difficulties in their early years of education.

Over the past number of years, we have witnessed a much-needed increase in cross-departmental and interagency co-operation. However, every day in our constituencies we see not only the benefits of that co-ordination but areas where it is sadly lacking.

Council services and youth workers are proven winners in the health and education sectors. Programmes such as Sure Start, which Mr Beggs spoke of, and respite services are plausible and work to facilitate a young person's development and health while making provision for the associated problems that parents may experience, particularly if looking after a child with complex needs.

Whilst recognising that great work is being done, the SDLP supports the motion's sentiment that much more must be done. The success of the multiagency support team for schools, since its inception in 2007, has been remarkable. It has proven to be an effective way of supporting children and families with additional and often unique needs. The benefit of MASTS is that it can secure real outcomes to benefit those children and their families. Finding common ground, especially on children's welfare and education, is vital for their protection and development. MASTS has succeeded in bringing together numerous agencies to deliver improved outcomes for our children.

Successful outcomes achieved by MASTS have taken many forms. Children's schoolwork has improved. That view is shared — Mr Beggs gave the statistics — by 78% of principals and 69% of teachers. However, the positive impact of collaborative work between health and education staff has brought that about

by giving enhanced support to parents, which results not only in academic improvement but, more importantly, in an increase in children's confidence and self-esteem. The most telling approvals and endorsements of the approach come not from the professionals, the teachers and the principals but from 95% of parents and 92% of children. Since 2007, 137 schools have received services from the scheme, with many more indicating an interest in adopting the model. The motion will assist the Departments in reviewing what work has been done and determining where else the model can be rolled out to give the most vulnerable children and those with the most specialised needs the support to grow and develop, without the additional problems caused by a fragmented approach to addressing their complex needs.

In my constituency, the western education support team, which Ms Boyle referred to, comprising nurses, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and family support workers, works tirelessly to support families and children with complex needs. The trust aims to provide services to children to make their life as full as possible. Many organisations from the statutory, community and voluntary, and private sectors work together to deliver high-quality, localised support. I know families in Foyle who are in receipt of that care, but I know many others who are dying for access to that support.

All this work is carried out in the face of dwindling resources and burgeoning demand. We need to support the support teams, which we must explore fully in the future. In addition, that co-ordinated approach, which is obviously such a success, should be extended to young people with special needs beyond the age of eight, particularly young people with special needs reaching school-leaving age. That is a perennial issue in the Assembly and is in dire need of being addressed.

I am grateful to the Members who brought the motion to the House. We in the SDLP endorse its aim to provide the best care for our young people and support for their families.

Mr McCarthy: I thank John McCallister and Roy Beggs for bringing this important subject to the Floor of the Assembly this afternoon.

In my speech to the Assembly last week, I said that our children were our greatest asset. This afternoon, exactly the same applies to the

motion that we have before us. Indeed, earlier today, we had another debate on children, which shows that the Assembly takes seriously the welfare and well-being of all our children.

The motion acknowledges the success that we already enjoy with our existing multiagency support teams. So common sense would say that we should stick at it to improve, extend, expand those teams and explore other avenues to reach an even better result.

2.00 pm

Opportunities are there. The work done so far has proved its worth. Therefore, a call goes out to our Ministers from whatever Department to come together, and let us see further advancement and even more success.

As I understand it, in 2006, children and young people in Northern Ireland received some £61 million over a two-year period to bring services at an early stage to many children who were falling behind for one reason or another. That investment was to promote a wide range of services, including preschool activities, therapy, support for children in care and child protection. Some £10 million a year was to provide breakfast in schools, homework clubs, after-school music and arts clubs and sporting opportunities, all of which has to be very much welcomed. It should also provide counselling and youth services and enhanced facilities for children with learning difficulties, very young children and their parents.

Through Sure Start, the focus will be on learning, creativity and healthy lifestyles, including addressing obesity in children and young people. Sure Start, Home-Start and Life Start have all proved to be very successful when they are properly funded. The Sure Start services are provided through a holistic approach that brings health, education and parenting support services together in a co-ordinated way. Sure Start has been designed to deliver for children and young people at a local level through a network of local statutory agencies and community-based voluntary organisations working in the field of health, early education and family support. The core services for Sure Start are outreach and home visiting, family support, primary and community healthcare, good quality play, learning and childcare experiences for children, and support for all our children in the community that recognises their differing needs. Sure Start, Home-Start and Life

Start have all done excellent work with children and young people.

All our health trusts provide excellent services. They perhaps do this at different levels and certainly under very different names, but, nevertheless, they give good multiagency support where it is required. Multiagency working is about different services joining forces to prevent problems occurring in the first place. In other words, prevention is better than cure. The Children's Workforce Development Council, through its Every Child Matters strategy, covers a wide range of issues to get the best possible outcomes for children and young people; that has to be fully supported.

In conclusion, we wish to see every school and children's nursery in Northern Ireland benefit from the joined-up approach that has proved so successful, so that all youngsters can develop into better, healthier and well-educated citizens. The Alliance Party fully supports the motion.

Ms Brown: I also support the motion. Health is central to our future well-being. Therefore, it is vital that any problems are identified early, at whatever stage in life. That is particularly important for young children in order to enable them to achieve their full potential and improve their life chances.

Early detection is central to children who, at an early stage, show signs of difficulties, such as speech or behavioural problems, or physical signs that something is not quite right. These problems may often not be readily identifiable by parents or carers in the home but can be identified in an educational environment by a teacher, for example, who will have the experience and knowledge of these problems and symptoms. Such issues can hinder a child's development and impact on their ability to progress in an educational environment in line with their peers. If undetected, it can also lead to bullying, if they are seen as being different from their peers, and to a wealth of problems later in life.

Multiagency support teams or multidisciplinary teams play a central role in the detection and treatment of problems that children may begin to show when in school. They offer an excellent model for tackling need by bringing together professionals from both the educational and health sectors and placing the child at the centre of care.

A multiagency support team was established in the Northern Trust in order to meet the recommendations laid out in various reports, namely Every Child Matters. Similar multidisciplinary teams have been established across the other health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland.

The support teams are transdisciplinary and seek to enhance inclusion and performance and, subsequently, reduce educational underachievement. That is very important, especially for children from deprived backgrounds who are at a particular disadvantage. Therefore, it is vital that children with particular problems are identified early and assisted with the support of their school and local health trust. I am pleased that, to date, the multiagency support team in Northern Ireland has received the confidence and support of those involved in it.

The Health Minister recently revealed that 78% of school principals and 69% of teachers believed that recipients benefited from intervention, as did 95% of parents and carers. That is most promising and is a sign of success.

I am pleased that most schools in Antrim have signed up to support the programme and am keen to see other schools signing up as well. That will ensure that all children can benefit from early detection and care. In order for that to happen, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety — not being responsible for schools or education, but being responsible for health and well-being — needs the support of the Minister of Education. Given that changes to the education and library board system are under way, with the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority, I worry that that could delay the expansion of multiagency support teams across the Province and, hence, impact negatively on schoolchildren who not currently enrolled in the scheme.

I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like others, I support the motion and thank the Members who have brought it forward for discussion. I listened carefully to other Members' contributions and picked up on a point that Mr Roy Beggs made when he talked about children who are missed at an earlier stage and how there had to be a multidisciplinary approach between education and health. However, the debate probably needs to go back further in a child's development. If

a child has been missed out in the important formative years between nought and three, or prior to that, we are missing the point. A child who has had the right support and help —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Gildernew: I will give way in a minute. I want to make a number of key points.

A child obviously needs the right support and care in their early years so that they are better able to avail themselves of their education when they get to that stage. Somebody made that point. We recognise that a child has to learn how to play and to learn how to do a number of things, such as developing motor skills and other things, before they are ready for a formal education setting. If a child has not learned how to play, it makes it very difficult for that child to learn how to read and write. If we leave it until a child is in the formal education system, I believe that it is too late. We cannot wait until they get to school.

Other Members have talked about the cost of putting in proper support, and I think that Mr Wells raised the figure of £1 million. However, it is a well-known fact that every pound spent in early years saves in the region of £20 in later life in respect of the value that you get for that intervention. It is incumbent on all of us to want to invest in our children's future. Therefore, if we get things right in those early years, it can have a financial implication. Equally, if we get it wrong, it affects not just the Department of Education but the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning — such as it is, or the Department that responsibility for young people who are not in education, employment or training goes to — and the justice system. Getting it wrong in those early years can have dire consequences later in a child's life.

Last November, I was very pleased to be at a conference in Armagh that was attended by the Education Minister. We heard from Suzanne Zeedyk, who is an academic from Scotland. I have mentioned her before in the Employment and Learning Committee and the Health Committee. Her study on the development of a child from before birth is absolutely fascinating in terms of how a baby's brain develops and the kind of receptors and information and messages they are able to receive and process and how that leads to a more solid foundation and building blocks on which to proceed.

I am hoping that we can get Ms Zeedyk here to talk to the Assembly, because it is enlightening and mind-blowing to hear that what we do and, equally, what we do not do, how we talk to babies and very small children, and how we talk and engage with even an unborn child can have developmental consequences for that child later on in life.

Many Members mentioned Sure Start, and I agree with what was said, but we have seen difficulties in funding for Sure Start and Home-Start. We know how important those kinds of agencies are in supporting parents, particularly first-time parents or parents who, for whatever reason, do not have family support around them — someone to advise them. In terms of Home-Start and the primary carers, the people that they can bring to a child's life make such a difference to their emotional well-being and learning. It is hugely important that we do not take our eye off the ball and that we invest properly in services like that. I suppose that parents need a lot of help and support. Sometimes, we do not know what advice is available out there, and the more interventions there are, the greater the chance of those parents being picked up.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that the primary school, nursery school or, for that matter, group setting, is the first occasion on which every child will have an opportunity to be seen, because of the compulsory nature? Although I agree that earlier intervention in the early years would be better, if it could be done, there is a difficulty in getting access to every child at that early age, because not every mother wants to engage when her child is at the early age.

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

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat. I take the Member's point, but, again, I reiterate my point: waiting until a child is five is, for a lot of children, too late. The one other area of intervention that every child has is through health visitors. We all know how important the health visitor coming around is and the kind of wisdom that that person can impart to new parents in what is a very scary and, sometimes, vulnerable time in their life. I still pick up the phone to talk to my health visitor, because I feel that their help, advice and signposting can be critical in those early stages.

I want to look at speech and language therapy as an example. One of the worst areas for waiting lists for speech and language therapy is Twinbrook and Poleglass. If a child is not able to communicate fully, they are not getting the best out of their education system. We need to address that and ensure that the children have that best start in life.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Ms Gildernew: I want to make one final point. Sure Start is not linked to deprivation, but I know that I was concerned when I found out that the most money was spent in North Down. We need to see more support in areas of high deprivation.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as a member of the Health Committee. Addressing the needs of our children and young people must remain a top priority for us all, and the joined-up work of multidiscipline teams is crucial and must be encouraged and developed.

The 2006 funding announcement by Peter Hain of the setting aside of £61 million for children and young people was a very welcome development in helping them to get the best possible start in life. That project has many commendable ideas, including the extension of the opening hours of our schools, offering themselves as venues for an integrated package of education, health and care. The benefits, which extend well beyond the school gate in providing counselling, youth services, youth workers and working with very young people through the Sure Start scheme, are commendable projects that are well worthy of continued support.

A multiagency approach on the ground between professionals from such areas as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and social work is vital to deliver on the key objectives that were set out in 2006. The multiagency approach must be reflected not only on the ground, but at ministerial level. I commend the joined-up work to date, and I trust that it will continue. There is a lot of good work ongoing, and that is to be recognised, commended and encouraged. However, great needs still exist in Northern Ireland.

2.15 pm

As with many healthcare issues, early identification is crucial to rectifying problems. I know that autism continues to be a big concern because I was recently contacted by parents across my constituency of North Down who expressed concerns about the support — or lack of it — for children with autism in schools.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is about to make the usual request for more resources for North Down. How does he react to the comments made by the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone Mrs Gildernew that the highest expenditure in this service is indeed in his own constituency?

Mr Dunne: I thank Mr Wells for that intervention from South Down.

[Laughter.]

It is important to put it in context. We have singled out one issue. An area of North Down may be getting substantial support in relation to Sure Start, but I am sure that many others are deficient. It is wrong to isolate one source of funding in relation to North Down.

Given the complex nature of many problems from which our children and young people suffer, it is crucial that the right infrastructure be put in place to deal with the wide range of social and health difficulties that exist. I would like to see greater uptake from schools to ensure that the right structure is in place for vulnerable children, young people and parents. In the South Eastern Trust area, there are 115 schools out of the 133 signed up. We need to ensure that every school is open to working with multiagency support teams.

I commend both the work to date and the Minister for his continued support in this matter, and I look forward to further progress in future. I support the motion.

Mr Swann: I thank my colleague Mr Roy Beggs for bringing this motion forward. It has been an interesting debate so far, with cross-party support until this point. I await the contribution of the Green Party, which I am sure will continue that.

Multiagency support teams have been operational, as has already been said, since November 2007. They represent a clear demonstration of what can be achieved when Departments, health trusts and education boards all work

successfully together. I cannot emphasise that enough. This is a positive example of what can happen when public bodies and Departments break out of their respective silos and work cohesively.

Mr Wells said earlier that these groups and functions work well behind the scenes. By raising their successes and profile today, I sincerely hope that we do not put them in jeopardy. The Assembly has an awful habit of taking things that work well and turning them into things that work badly, jeopardising the good work that they do. That is the basis of our motion. It takes a good example of something that works well, both cross-departmentally and across Northern Ireland, and calls for a review of it, a review of service provision and an expansion of the service to the schools and nurseries that are a part of that scheme.

The multidisciplinary approach has meant that the needs of young people can be taken into account from both health and educational perspectives; that is meant to double the reward in prevention further down the line, as Mrs Gildernew said. One pound invested now saves £20 later. Children, parents and staff from the approximately 140 schools involved are vocal about the tangible benefits that they have seen from the MASTS schemes. By taking only a few preliminary measures, parents and school staff have been able to benefit from a wealth of additional training and knowledge. The scheme is also important because of its ability to refer children to other services as required.

We must realise the importance of working together. We can bring together health, education and social services into one focal point from which we can really deliver for pupils and young children. That is something to which we can also look forward when the Minister of Education brings forward his area plans. We can adopt the delivery methods behind MASTS and include them. Ballee Community High School has put forward a proposal especially in regard to that. It is the delivery of an all-service model at a secondary-level school. There is also more evidence to show that there is improvement in the performance of children and family units that have been referred to one of the MASTS.

I think that the following statistics have been quoted: 78% of principals and 69% of teachers say that there is benefit from MASTS, and, more importantly, 95% of parents and 92% of

pupils agree. That is a measure of success and acceptance from the target audience. Therefore, given that the end users — the pupils and the parents — gave the scheme such high acknowledgement, we have to be successful in extending it.

The scheme has worked well throughout the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area thus far, but there is also a significant problem with the long waiting lists of those schools. That was the rationale behind the motion — to ask for its expansion. A large number of schools have applied to join the scheme since the closing date passed. In my constituency of North Antrim, 16 out of 30 primary schools in the Ballymena Borough Council area are not part of the scheme, nor are 12 out of 23 in the Ballymoney Borough Council area, nor seven out of 15 in the Moyle District Council area. A number of those applied to be part of the scheme but have been unable to access it because of the closing date.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member acknowledge that some schools may not have applied to join because of a lack of information, or because they feel they are already burdened by the amount of bureaucracy in the schools system, do not fully appreciate the benefits and do not want the additional paperwork that they perceive may come with the scheme? That is not to say that every school would not benefit from it.

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

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Member for his intervention. I fully agree: a large amount of paperwork crosses a principal's desk due to area plans, interventions, inspections and all the rest, and when there is something as critical and beneficial as a MAST scheme, everything should be done and everyone should be encouraged so that every school applies for it. It is disappointing that, due to a limited budget and scope, not all schools that have applied have been able to be part of this scheme. Quite often, schools in deprived areas are overcome by the burden of the cumbersome amount of paperwork involved and are not able to take it up.

We do not see enough of these success stories. I hope that the Minister will review the scheme and look to identify other areas of the Department's work that could be bolstered in a similar way so that we can bring in the delivery

of primary education needs and look at taking a holistic approach to the development of our children and young people.

Mr Agnew: I hope to reassure the Member who spoke previously by saying that I support the motion. I do not want to break up this cosy consensus. The principle of interdisciplinary or interagency working is a good one. Members will be aware that I am working on a private Member's Bill to help progress the work between Departments and agencies in delivering services to children, so I welcome and am happy to get behind the motion.

As has been highlighted, it is important that we work with children from the earliest possible opportunity. That may be in primary school, but some Members mentioned that it may precede that, whether at preschool, Sure Start or playgroups. We need to do so to identify problems that some children might have that could be detected in the early years if they have access to the proper services, and indeed professionals, who have the ability to detect such problems early on. I echo what Ms Gildernew said in that we have to try to reach them even earlier than when they are aged four. Ultimately, the earlier we act, the more benefit the children will feel in the future, but we can also ensure the most efficient use of resources. As has been pointed out, money spent in the early years yields greater benefit further down the line.

I thank those who tabled the motion, and I echo what Mr Beggs said about the roll-out to those schools where the multiagency support teams are not currently working. However, I do so with a note of caution. What we have, as has been highlighted, is one principle with different models across different health trusts.

In my area, from what I hear, people's experience is that ASCET provided an exemplary service when first established. However, as take-up has increased, resources have not. In fact, resources have become increasingly stretched, to the extent that some feel that the service has been diluted. If that is the case — I can speak only for my area — and it is being reflected across the board, we need to be mindful of that. It should serve as a warning.

Although the tone of today's debate is about promoting the service, and rightly so, if we are to have a review, let us look at any mistakes made. I support the motion and its call for the service to be universal. However, we do not want

to increase the quantity, just to be seen to be serving all children, if that means risking the quality. If we expand the service, we must also expand the resources.

Mr Wells touched on the issue of the different names given to health trust teams, which causes some confusion. As we know, the education and library boards do not work within the same boundaries as the health trusts. So there are issues for children and, equally, professionals who move between health trusts. It is not just the names that differ but the models: some differ slightly; others quite significantly.

If we are to review the service, let us draw out best practice. Let us try to get a model of best practice that we can promote across the board to ensure that the service is regional, regardless of the health trust area in which children grow up. I, again, welcome today's motion. We can see the benefits of good practice in interdisciplinary and interagency working, such as those for children and society as a whole.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Agnew: Any review must seek to improve the service and build on the success to date.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time starts at 2.30 pm, the debate will continue afterwards with the Minister's response. I ask Members to take their ease until 2.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Schools: Mid Ulster

1. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Education what capital build plans are being considered for schools in the Mid Ulster constituency.

(AQO 1749/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Builds at Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery School, St Columba's Primary School and Magherafelt High School are currently on site and due to be completed this year.

As you will know, I have commissioned the education and library boards, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the other sectors, to undertake area planning. That will result in a planned network of viable and sustainable schools to meet the needs of children and young people in an area. Future capital investment will be targeted at supporting approved area plans. At this time, I am not in a position to comment on any specific school or potential project or on which capital builds may be considered. There is, however, a need to ensure that we continue to invest strategically in the schools estate. When it is appropriate, I will announce future plans for capital investment.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be more than aware that I have raised the need for a newbuild for Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt. I will continue to do so. I understand what he has said about being unable to make any decisions. However, I ask that he and his officials keep the matter on their agenda in order to ensure that the school gets its much-needed newbuild.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member is perfectly entitled and quite correct to lobby on behalf of schools in his constituency. After all, that is why we have a local Assembly and elected representatives to represent the views of constituencies, etc.

With regard to the area planning project that we have in place, we are looking at a sustainable schools estate for the future. We want to ensure

that we use the limited resources that are available to us to the best of our ability and that schools that we build in this term will operate and provide much-needed education to local communities for at least a generation to come.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mr McCrea raised an issue that I was going to raise. I would appreciate it if the Minister gave the House a bit more detail on the Rainey Endowed School, because it has been in the system for quite a considerable period. It is about time that we heard about further progress other than what could be seen as procrastination.

Can the Minister also give the House some sort of assessment of the current situation with regard to the capital newbuild for Holy Trinity College in Cookstown?

Mr Speaker: I must say that the Member is trying my patience. There should be one inquiry only to the Minister.

Mr O'Dowd: My answer to the Member's questions will reflect that which I gave to Mr McCrea. That is not because I am avoiding answering a question: the process that would give me the information with which to answer the question is not yet complete. We are talking about spending significant amounts of public money. We need to ensure that that money is invested in such a way that it provides an education service in a community for a generation to come.

As I am on record as saying previously — and this is no reflection of or hint in any way about any projects to which Members have referred or will refer during Question Time — we will not plan the future schools estate on the needs of individual schools. We have to be satisfied that the provision of a new school will provide education to a sector or sectors in the future.

Ms Gildernew: The Minister may have covered part of my question in his previous answer. Can he assure me that the area planning process will address the capital and education need of any given area across all sectors? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for the question. Yes; that is why we have put area planning in place. We want to be assured that plans meet the needs of all sectors in a specific geographical area. Indeed, some of that planning will cross area boundaries.

Area planning will not be the big bang theory. It will not happen overnight. It will be progressive investment in the schools estate through newbuilds, amalgamation of schools and strategic use of our minor works programme, etc. Area planning will be the template upon which all of those issues will be decided.

Educational Welfare Officers

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education what importance he places on the role of educational welfare officers. (AQO 1750/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As Minister of Education, I place great importance on the role of educational welfare officers (EWOs) and the vital support services that they provide to schools, young people and their families.

The education welfare service's role is to promote regular school attendance by supporting schools and by engaging with children and their families in a structured and purposeful way so that attendance at school can be improved. Regular attendance is essential if children and young people are to obtain the best outcomes from their time in education. In recognition of the important role that education welfare officers provide, my Department invested £2.7 million in the education welfare service in 2011-12 in addition to the funding that the boards provided from their block grant.

Although their primary role relates to school attendance, education welfare officers also provide support for vulnerable groups of children who are known to face additional challenges, including school-age mothers, looked-after children and Travellers. In providing support, they deploy valuable social work skills and use a range of strategies such as mediation, group counselling and one-to-one support sessions between schools, pupils and their families where there are difficulties with regular school attendance, school suspensions or expulsions, or behavioural problems. Education welfare officers also assist my Department by providing professional advice to inform policymaking decisions.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he acknowledge that education welfare officers now require the same social work qualifications as other social workers? What is he doing to address the anomaly in the wage structure that results in many unnecessary

vacancies in education welfare officer positions as people move elsewhere for better paid jobs?

Mr O'Dowd: Wage negotiations in the Department are conducted through structured negotiation bodies. It would not be useful to interfere with them in the Assembly today. When it comes to the qualifications that are required for education welfare officers, we clearly want the best qualified and most highly motivated people working in that field. It is a challenging office, but it is also a very rewarding one, in the sense that education welfare officers make real and positive changes in young people's lives as they have the ability to liaise between schools and young people, especially where that relationship has broken down, and can encourage families and help young people to be regular attenders at school.

Mr Campbell: If work that education welfare officers carry out, particularly on the primary sector in working-class areas, shows emerging trends, is that analysis taken account of so that those areas can benefit from the trends?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said in my original answer to Mr Beggs, the education welfare officers' work plays a part in policy development. If the Member writes to me about the specific areas that he referred to, I will investigate them further, but I am also assured that our education and library boards will be working closely with our education welfare officers to ensure that they drill down into the trends that the Member mentioned to see what additional work needs to be carried out, and, in some circumstances, to see whether additional resources are required. If the boards cannot provide them, the Department will have a duty to consider requests that are made to it for specific caseloads, bearing in mind the difficult financial constraints within which we have to work.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he elaborate on the engagement with disadvantaged groups such as Traveller children?

Mr O'Dowd: The attendance of many Traveller pupils is known to be problematic. Education welfare officers play a vital role in obtaining an understanding of the cultural values of the Traveller community and in developing its trust so that families can be encouraged to improve school attendance. Education welfare officers also play a valuable role in ensuring equal

access to education for children and young people from the Travelling community.

Mr D Bradley: An féidir leis an Aire a dheimhniú nach mbeidh aon chiorrú sa bhuiséad atá ann d'oifigh leasa oideachais? Will the Minister give us an absolute assurance that there will be no reduction in the budgets for the work of education welfare officers?

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith as an cheist sin. I have no plans to reduce the budget line for education welfare officers in the Department. All our education and library boards invest a substantial amount of money in the work of education welfare officers, and I am continually reviewing my budgets to see whether we can find a surplus. That is very difficult in the current circumstances, but if we come across surplus or unspent funds we will redirect them to where they are most needed.

Ms Lo: I used to be a social worker, and I worked with a number of EWOs in my time in the trusts. It is not just about money. Will the Minister consider extending the role of the EWOs to give them more involvement with families, rather than their just being seen as truancy officers?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that that role currently exists for educational welfare officers. The days of the truancy officer are, I hope, long gone. Educational welfare officers engage with families and schools. They engage with families on poor attendance, but they want to examine the reasons behind poor attendance rather than simply knocking on a parent's door and saying that their son or daughter has not been to school for x number of days and that they need to send them to school. Educational welfare officers will engage with those families, drill down into the circumstances and attempt to assist the families in any way they can. They also carry out work between schools and young people where relationships have broken down, which involves suspensions or expulsions, so the remit is much more complex than working simply as truancy officers.

I am always reluctant to make announcements on the way forward in response to an Assembly question, but we are always open to suggestions on the role of anyone in the Department of Education or in the broader education family, but they have to fit into the broader framework of where education is going.

Schools: Budgets

3. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to devolve more of the central departmental budget to the control of schools. (AQO 1751/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The delegation of financial and managerial responsibilities to boards of governors is a key element in the Department's overall policy to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Within the finite resources available for education services, I am committed to ensuring that as much funding as possible is delegated directly to schools. However, it is important to recognise that it is not always practical or economically beneficial to delegate all moneys to schools. To reduce the administrative burden on schools and maximise economies of scale, a number of budgets are held and managed centrally by the education and library boards on behalf of schools in their area, such as those for school transport and meals. Furthermore, schools should recognise that greater delegation will mean greater accountability, responsibility and time management.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his response. Why do we in Northern Ireland have the lowest percentage of delegated schools budget compared with anywhere else in the UK?

Mr O'Dowd: This is one of those arguments where you use the statistics that suit your argument the best. On this occasion, you are choosing the statistics that give that answer. I could quote statistics back to you that suggest that the delegation of funding in this jurisdiction is as good as that in other jurisdictions, if not higher. I assume that the Member was referring to the simple delegation of the common funding formula that is broken down to schools, but, on top of that, we also provide schools with many different services. If those were taken into account, as they are in England, they would bring us up to match what is happening in England and may well go above other jurisdictions.

Mrs Dobson: Does the Minister accept that, for too long, his Department has not capitalised on the skills and expertise that exist in school boards of governors, particularly in relation to allowing them to use resources more effectively on the ground?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I do not accept that. Our schools estate simply would not operate if it were not for the excellent work of our schools'

boards of governors. At the end of the day, they are the people who manage and hold our schools to account. When I am out and about talking to school leaders and practitioners, I get a mixed picture on that argument. Quite rightly, many schools' teams of management tell me that they are under significant pressure and that dealing with bureaucracy, budgets and so on takes up an extraordinary amount of their time. If we follow that argument to its conclusion and I give schools further funds, resources and responsibilities to deal with, schools' teams of management will be put under further pressure. I do not believe that that is the way forward. The relationship that we have now works, but, in saying that, I will also announce in the time ahead the review of the common funding formula. If schools or Members wish to make their views on the further delegation of funds known to that review body, it is a matter for schools and MLAs to do so. It will be a matter for the review body whether it wishes to comment on that in the report.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answers. To help to illuminate the debate, could the Minister indicate what percentage of his total budget is directed towards schools?

2.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: The aggregated schools budget represents about 59.4% of the Department's total resource budget. Well over £1 billion goes directly to schools, and, on top of that, other services such as transport, free school meals and professional development are provided to schools, and a wide range of other funds are available to schools.

DE: Budget

4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the Department's effectiveness in utilising its full budget allocation. (AQO 1752/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has consistently sought to fully and effectively utilise its entire budget allocation for the provision of education services. All Departments are in the process of finalising their 2011-12 provisional out-turn, which will not be reported to the Department of Finance and Personnel until May. For that reason, I do not have specific figures to provide

you at this time. I expect the final position for 2011-12 to be consistent with what has been achieved in the past two years, when the Department's unutilised total budget was less than 1% in 2010-11 and 2009-2010.

Mr Douglas: The Minister today announced an additional £1.4 million for the preschool sector, which is very encouraging. However, in today's economic downturn and with a set budget, how was the Minister able to do such a wonderful job?

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you for the compliment; I will take note of that. Since coming into office, I have been reviewing my budget and looking at all the budget lines in the Department of Education. We have seen where expenditure is taking place and where further expenditure is required. I believe firmly that the early years sector requires further investment, and I will outline the complete budget package in the weeks ahead. I will outline where those savings were made, how those funds came about and how we will redistribute them in the Department of Education.

I am, quite rightly, under an onus from the Programme for Government to meet certain targets, one of which is on the provision of preschool education, which we debated earlier. I wish to meet those targets. I also think — I think that the House is united in this point of view — that the earlier we make an intervention with young people, the better their educational outcomes will be, hence I am prepared to make funding available there as well. As I said, I will make an announcement at a later date that will show the complete picture of our review and where that funding has come from.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister perhaps reiterate the extent of the impact of the initial British Government cuts on his budget? Could he outline how he liaises with the Finance Minister on those budgetary difficulties?

Mr O'Dowd: The outworkings of the British Government's cuts have been devastating to education. We are able to make announcements, as I did today, of several million pounds investment over a number of years, which is very welcome. It has to be remembered that, even though you are dealing with hundreds of millions or billions of pounds, a small investment of a number of millions of pounds makes a major difference to a school or to community life, and we have to keep focused on that. However, the

impact of the Budget has been devastating. As I said, I have been reviewing my budget since I came into post, and we are seeking to make savings where we can and reinvest those savings back into education. All my policies and direction of travel are dictated by the budgetary constraints, and I hope to ensure that those policies can operate in a very difficult budgetary climate.

Mr Cree: The Minister referred to devastating cuts. Could he, therefore, explain how he can justify the charade of issuing 50,000 circulars, in concert with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, to ask for people's view on cross-border education? Can he detail how much that will cost?

Mr O'Dowd: With respect to the Member, I do not believe that his objections are budgetary rather than political. If he sets his political objections aside, he will see that planning cross-border educational services makes economic sense, because many of the border communities, regardless of their political views, operate across the border as if it does not exist. So, if we can provide education to the benefit of those local communities, Minister Quinn and I will move forward and plan on that basis. I believe that if we plan on the basis of economies of scale, we will save money for both jurisdictions in the long run. It ticks all those boxes.

The final costs have not been worked out yet, but they will be minimal because I am not bringing in outside consultants to carry out the work. Statisticians in my Department will analyse the costs related to my Department's responsibilities in the project. I am not aware of the cost implications for Minister Quinn's Department; that is a matter for him. However, I can assure you that, in any decision that I make, I will want to ensure that I get best value for money.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister has reminded the House on several occasions in recent months that one of the objectives of a new Education and Skills Authority (ESA) would be to bring greater efficiency to the system and reduce budgets. Will he tell the House exactly when we will see a Bill to give effect to ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: My ministerial colleagues have a draft ESA Bill. The Executive will decide when that ESA Bill is to come before the Assembly. Members will then have a full opportunity to debate it, and they, too, will see the benefits of moving towards an Education and Skills Authority.

Education: Chief Executive Posts

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Education why the posts of chief executive designate of the Education and Skills Authority, interim chief executive of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment and interim chief executive of Belfast Education and Library Board are all held by the same person.

(AQO 1753/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) appointed Mr Gavin Boyd as interim chief executive only after it had gone through an unsuccessful recruitment exercise. This is an interim measure, pending the board exploring other options for appointing a temporary chief executive, and it will ensure that it has an accounting officer in place in the meantime.

Mr Boyd is also currently interim chief executive of the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). This arrangement has been in place since June 2010 and is subject to review. Mr Boyd is undertaking his CCEA and BELB interim roles as part of his ESA chief executive designate responsibility under his current terms of employment and receives no additional remuneration.

Mr Allister: What does it say about these three key jobs if we are expected to believe that they can all be done at the same time, by the same person — even one paid £150,000? Is the Minister not embarrassed that Mr Boyd sat on the interview panel for the appointment of a chief executive to the Belfast Education and Library Board, was party to not appointing a chief executive and then took the job himself? Is the Minister not embarrassed by the empire building of this favoured son of the Department?

Mr O'Dowd: I would have thought that the Member who was on the airwaves expressing concern about the cost of a cup of tea or coffee in the Building would congratulate me on having one person doing three jobs for one wage. I think that I deserve a pat on the back for that, surely, from a Member who tells us that he is so concerned about public finances that he spends his time counting up the money spent on tea and coffee by Departments across the Executive.

Mr Boyd has been appointed to those posts as a temporary measure and will stay in a number of them until ESA is established. If the Belfast Education and Library Board wishes

to go further with the recruitment process, that is a matter for it. However, I believe that what we have in place now provides effective value for money for the public, ensures that all accountability measures are in place and ensures smooth transitions from the departure of Mr Carville from the Belfast board and to whatever the permanent position may be for the Belfast board in the future.

Remember that the Programme for Government dictates that ESA will be in place by 2013, so all of these matters will be measured by that.

Mr Storey: Minister, I am trying to unravel all the mystery and the mist surrounding why the Department seems so keen to retain the services of Mr Boyd? According to the terms and conditions of his first appointment — that of interim chief executive of ESA — there would be a review. What review of his work took place prior to his reappointment with a new contract?

Mr O'Dowd: Without personalising any of these matters, I can assure the Member that all proper procedures were followed before I, as is my duty as Education Minister, appointed the designate chief executive of ESA. All procedures were followed. I received legal advice and had lengthy discussions with my permanent secretary on the matter. So, all processes have been followed. Mr Boyd is in place, and we now have to concentrate on ensuring that we put in place the effective management controls and the board to hold any chief executive to account under ESA.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response so far. Will he give us an update on his Department's steps to appoint a new chief executive of the Belfast Education and Library Board?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said, the Belfast Education and Library Board is its own master in regard to those matters. It is a matter for the board to appoint its chief executive. I believe that the board has acted responsibly in that matter. It has gone through the recruitment procedure, but did not receive any successful candidates, so it appointed an interim chief executive. Given the timescales for the boards to be in place, it is a responsible and well-thought-out policy of the board to have Mr Boyd in place as an interim. If the Belfast Board decides to move further in the recruitment process, that is a matter for the Belfast Board.

Teacher Education

6. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the review of teacher education.
(AQO 1754/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My officials briefed the Education Committee on 21 March on the direction of travel for teacher education, arising from the joint Department of Education/Department for Employment and Learning consultation on the teacher education review. On foot of the comments received from Committee members, together with the responses to the consultation exercise, I am finalising, in liaison with Minister Farry, a draft strategy for the way forward for teacher education. I intend to publish the strategy once both the Education and Employment and Learning Committees have had an opportunity to comment on it.

Mr Dallat: Can the Minister assure the House that the future position of St Mary's is safeguarded?

Mr O'Dowd: That is a question that would be best directed towards the Minister for Employment and Learning.

Mr Speaker: I continually say to the whole House that supplementary questions must relate to the original question.

Education: Area Planning

7. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education for an update, including timelines, on area-based planning.
(AQO 1755/11-15)

15. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Education when the area plans will be published.
(AQO 1763/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Speaker, with your permission I will answer questions 7 and 15 together.

The terms of reference for area planning issued last December. They clearly highlight the scope and timescales involved in the first part of that process. Area planning is a complex and multifaceted process, and this is the first time that it has been undertaken on this scale. It is therefore crucial that the approach developed for all aspects of the process is common and consistent across all board areas.

An area planning co-ordination group has been established. It is chaired by a senior departmental official and supported by other officials responsible for area planning. It comprises

representatives from the five education and library boards and CCMS, as all of those organisations have statutory responsibility for planning. It is an operational group that provides a forum for the boards to engage directly with the Department to agree matters of process and to obtain clarification on issues as they emerge.

To date I have received from all boards draft area plans for stand-alone special schools and draft area plans for post-primary provision. Primary area plans will be submitted by the end of June. My officials are considering those plans against departmental policies and are engaged in dialogue through the area planning co-ordination group. The time frame and processes for consultation will be agreed and the plans will be published for consultation. I am hopeful of having the final plans agreed by the autumn.

Mr Frew: Can the Minister give an assurance to the House that, when the area plans take place, the scenario that has faced Castle Tower School in Ballymena — which he will be aware of — whereby schools are forced to merge and take action, yet there is not enough facility or money for newbuilds, will not take place throughout the Province, with regard to schools being forced to move, although they might need the facilities for a newbuild, and that money will not be forthcoming?

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware of Castle Tower Special School. One of the reasons that I brought forward the special schools area plan so early was because, after visiting a number of our special schools, I am of the view that they are not in proper condition and that their facilities are not modern and fit for purpose. That is why I have asked for the special schools area plan to be brought forward. The area plan is about what it says on the tin. It is about planning for the future to ensure that policy and money follow each other, and that schools and communities have an action plan in front of them and know the direction of travel for the schools estate and the provision of education going into the future.

3.00 pm

Employment and Learning

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer. Question 3 has been transferred to the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Tourism and Hospitality

1. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to ensure that there is an adequate supply of people qualified to work in the tourism and hospitality sector. (AQO 1764/11-15)

5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action he is taking to support the tourism and hospitality sector. (AQO 1768/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 5 together.

Over the next two years, Northern Ireland will continue to host an impressive series of events and celebrations and continue to launch many exciting new visitor attractions. These events offer Northern Ireland an opportunity to showcase what our region has to offer. I recognise the opportunities for the tourism and hospitality industry over this period, and I am determined to make the most of them to provide employment for the local labour market and to boost the local economy. Obviously, the skills of staff are fundamental to success. Consequently, I have designated tourism and hospitality as a priority skills area.

In addition, my Department's skills solutions team has been working with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and People 1st, the sector skills council for hospitality. They have developed and put in place a customised training programme for customer service, known as WorldHost. In the financial year just ended, I allocated almost £315,000 to assist over 1,850 hospitality and tourism staff to achieve this level 2 qualification, and I have committed to finance the training of staff over the next two years.

We are delighted that the north coast will host the Irish Open later this year, and, in anticipation, my officials have developed a further short training programme with the Northern Regional College to assist the hospitality and tourism sector in that area to upskill its staff. This programme will also be rolled out to other areas of Northern Ireland in this financial year, through the FE college network.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister assure the House that all relevant age groups can avail themselves of any appropriate courses to further

their qualifications in the tourism and hospitality sector?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Robinson for his question, and the answer is that it is up to companies to put forward the personnel to be trained. However, the course is open to all, irrespective of age or background. With regard to the area from which the Member comes, I was recently in Derry to look at some of the WorldHost training in action. At that stage, I can confirm, those being trained were from a diverse range of backgrounds, including age.

Mr Dickson: What is the Minister's rationale for investing in the hospitality industry?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Dickson for his question. The ultimate answer has to be about creating a legacy. The Executive are making a wonderful investment in infrastructure. We are attracting events. We have a good programme over the next number of years, but we want to see the Northern Ireland tourism industry grow and flourish and be the future of our economy for many years to come. All the international evidence shows that the way that we build the legacy and get return and other visits is through word of mouth and recommendations made by families and friends. The key determinant of those recommendations is the quality of the customer care, so it is important that we complement what is happening in investment with the training of staff to make sure that we have an all-round package and that the tourist industry in Northern Ireland continues to be a great success.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, will you comment on what you feel is the value of investment in tourist centres such as the Titanic centre and the Saint Patrick Centre in Downpatrick and on their ability to create the right environment for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to learn about tourism?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCrea for his question, and I understand the point that he makes. My colleague the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister is better placed to comment on the actual facilities. However, as well as being buildings, the facilities are where people interact with the workers. The training that we are doing around WorldHost applies in respect of what the Member suggested as much as it does to anything else.

Ms Ruane: What role does our further education sector play in ensuring that the needs of our tourism and hospitality sector are met?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. In general, the FE sector is a good means by which we address the specific training needs of businesses. In my main answer, I referred to the Northern Regional College's development of particular programmes. So, we are very much using the FE sector as a partner in rolling out our investment in tourism and hospitality training.

Mr McClarty: The Minister will agree that 2012 has the potential to attract record numbers of visitors to Northern Ireland. What steps is he taking to ensure that all those who currently work in the tourism and hospitality sectors promote and represent Northern Ireland to its very best?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Given his constituency interest, he will, hopefully, take good heart from the particular recognition that we are giving to the Irish Open, which is on the north coast. In response to the specifics of his question, I stress that the training is not only open to new people who want to go into the tourism and hospitality sector but is targeted at those who currently work in it. We are looking to companies to bring forward their current staff, as well as new recruits, for training.

Essential Skills

4. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any plans to encourage more adults to join essential skills classes in further education colleges. (AQO 1767/11-15)

Dr Farry: Raising the essential skills of adults continues to be one of my top priorities. Since the launch of the Essential Skills for Living strategy in 2002, the further education colleges have played a vital role in ensuring that adults are fully equipped with the literacy, numeracy and ICT skills that they need to get a job, progress in work and play a full part in society. Colleges have continued to increase their capacity to offer free high-quality essential skills programmes. They are the main providers, delivering 68% of all essential skills provision, with courses embedded across mainstream and DEL-funded programmes from entry level to level 2. With 45 campuses and around 600 outreach centres, colleges deliver essential skills in a variety of settings, including local communities, schools and the workplace. Colleges have

developed partnerships with employers, statutory agencies, such as health trusts, and a number of voluntary and community organisations to provide flexible and innovative programmes at a time, place and pace suitable to their individual needs. They have established strong links with the trade unions, which are funded through my Department's union learning fund to deliver essential skills in the workplace.

Essential skills across all provision is continuing to increase. In the 2010-11 year, there were almost 60,000 enrolments, which accounts for nearly 22,000 individuals. That is the highest number recorded since the strategy began. However, I am not complacent. Through the annual college development planning process, my Department sets rigorous essential skills targets for individual colleges. They include separate targets for younger people aged between 16 and 19 and for those over 19. Therefore, I am confident that the current plans set by the colleges will continue to encourage more adults, particularly those who are most marginalised, to gain essential skills qualifications.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be more than aware of the educational underachievement issue that plagues working-class areas. Indeed, most of those young people become adults, and, therefore, the problem is not solved. Many of them become parents —

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

Mr I McCrea: — and are tasked with having to deal with their children's education. Will the Minister give the House an assurance that those people will continue to be targeted and will be given as much activity as possible to ensure that they have the level of education that is required?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCrea for his supplementary question, and I am happy to give him that assurance. I want to ensure that every person in this society has the potential to develop fully and to take whatever opportunities they are capable of availing themselves of. I stress that a range of programmes is available to help people. Essential skills is clearly one of those. The Member will also be aware that my Department leads on behalf of the wider Executive on the formulation of a strategy around NEETs. Other aspects fall to other Departments, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and

Public Safety. They are key partners in that strategy. So, this is certainly a priority for my Department, as, I believe, it is for the entire Executive.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. How could the partnerships between regional colleges and the voluntary and community sector be increased with a view to improving literacy and numeracy skills among young adults?

Dr Farry: The Member will be aware of the learner access and engagement pilot (LEAP) programme, which looks at such partnership working. The pilot concluded on 31 March. It was directed at providing support for hard-to-reach adults who are economically inactive with few or no qualifications and encouraging them to enrol and complete further education courses, including essential skills. PricewaterhouseCoopers recently submitted a longitudinal evaluation of the programme; that evaluation will be considered carefully and used to inform future policy decisions.

Mr Beggs: Is the Minister aware of the concern in the community and voluntary sector about accessing essential skills courses? That sector can play a vital role in encouraging people to take up those courses. At present, many of the courses are inaccessible for local communities.

Dr Farry: I understand the Member's point. However, essential skills are offered across a wide range of facilities across Northern Ireland. In the FE sector there are 45 campuses across Northern Ireland, and, beyond that, there are about 600 outreach centres in different locations, including communities. We should not be complacent, but outreach is clearly understood and practised.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire an bhfuil aon rún aige níos mó airgead a chur ar fáil le haghaidh printísigh fhásta. Does the Minister have any plans to increase funding for adult apprenticeships before the demise of his Department?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Some interesting comments were made on that topic over the weekend. I inherited a situation in my Department in which the budget would not allow any funding of adult apprenticeships, and I am not sure whether the person who made those comments was aware of the party affiliation of the Minister who was in office at the time that decision was taken. I have been

able to restore 50% of the funding that would otherwise have been cut. Since that decision was taken last September we have conducted a review of adult training, and a report is due in the next few weeks.

Youth Unemployment: Rural Areas

6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what action his Department is taking to tackle youth unemployment in rural areas.
(AQO 1769/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware that the economic downturn has hit young people particularly hard, regardless of whether they are from urban or rural areas. In addition to the suite of programmes and initiatives aimed at tackling youth unemployment already available across Northern Ireland, the Executive recently agreed a policy to add to the provision, the core elements of which are as follows: early, intensive diagnosis of employability skills; opportunities for taster work experience for clients while on benefits; individual skills- and careers-focused assessments; sector-based work experience and training in areas of skills shortage; a new employer subsidy for up to one year; a new emphasis on continuing skills development and growth; earlier opportunities to begin skills development than is currently available; and a range of new measures to help young people not in education, employment or training. The policy framework will be finalised when the finance is agreed by the Executive, on the recommendation of the Finance Minister. There is also a range of specialist provision for people with disabilities offered by the Disability Employment Service. The Local Employment Intermediary Service operates in areas of particular deprivation, and it has recently been extended to Moyle, Cookstown and Newry and Mourne.

Although Training for Success and, in particular, the skills for your life strand are available to young people who do not remain in school, attend further education or participate in an apprenticeship programme, the Member will be aware that I will shortly bring forward a strategy to help young people who are not in education, employment or training. That will be complementary to the proposals to tackle youth unemployment that I have just outlined.

It is my intention that all measures be informed by local needs and circumstances. I will seek

to ensure that no young person is left behind, regardless of their circumstances or location.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for those action points. He might agree that they appear to be common to the youth unemployed in urban and rural settings. Has the Minister undertaken any research specific to the needs of the rural youth unemployed?

3.15 pm

Dr Farry: It is worth stressing to the Member that the new measures we are setting out will apply across Northern Ireland irrespective of people's backgrounds. They will be open to people who live in urban and rural settings. In addition, we have a number of existing programmes, and rural factors are taken into account. I referred in my main answer to LEMIS, and already that has been extended to Cookstown, Moyle and Newry and Mourne, which are predominantly rural parts of Northern Ireland. That shows sensitivity towards rural interests.

While I am on my feet, it is worth reminding Mr Nesbitt with reference to the figures for youth unemployment that they have stabilised in Northern Ireland over the past year in contrast to the other three countries in the UK. Although we have a long way to go, the situation here is not as serious as in some other parts. That is a tribute to the work of my Department and a lot of the community sectors that work closely with us in helping young people.

Mr Campbell: The Minister alluded to youth unemployment in rural areas. He will be aware of the rising crime rate in rural areas as well. What liaison is being undertaken between his Department and the Department of Justice to ensure that opportunities are available to young people in rural areas but, as well, to ensure that the criminal activity that is going on at the moment is reduced?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Campbell for his question. The main vehicle for addressing the joined-up working that he suggests lies in the forthcoming NEETs strategy. That is very much intended to be a cross-departmental, Executive-wide document. My Department may well lead on it, but other Departments are making significant contributions towards that. Certainly, the Department of Justice and the PSNI will be key partners in a much more holistic approach to addressing the needs of young people.

Mr Hazzard: Given that South Down is statistically one of the most rural constituencies in the North and has an increasing number of young people out of work, will the Minister outline what he is doing specifically to tackle that problem in South Down?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and welcome him to the House. Obviously, the LEMIS programme in the Newry and Mourne area will capture parts of the current South Down constituency. I am also aware of the particular issues that affect the constituency, particularly with regard to fishing and the lack of opportunities that may pertain in that sector. There are also potential new opportunities with renewable energy on which my Department is working with local communities. A dialogue is going on around specific interventions that we can make to address some of the particular needs in the South Down area.

Mr Rogers: Has the Minister's Department earmarked funds to complement the rural transport fund in encouraging more access to a wider range of employment and training opportunities for the service users?

Dr Farry: Again, I thank the Member for the question and welcome him to the Assembly. There are no specific additional funds in the manner that the Member suggests. However, depending on the nature of the intervention that my Department supports, there can be circumstances in which assistance with transport is available.

College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise: Tuition Fees

7. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what discussions he has had with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development in relation to her decision to increase tuition fees for students from Great Britain wishing to study at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise. (AQO 1770/11-15)

Dr Farry: I understand that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has not yet taken a final decision on this issue. Minister O'Neill and I met in November 2011 to discuss the future arrangements for higher education fees and funding. At that meeting, she indicated her intention to consult on a proposal to increase fees at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise for new students from other

parts of the United Kingdom who commence higher education courses on or after 1 September 2012. The public consultation was launched on 15 February 2012 and will close on 10 May. The Minister and I have had no further discussions on this matter.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that it is fundamentally unfair and unjustifiable that fellow residents of the United Kingdom will face fees of up to £9,000 while students from the Republic will pay as little as just over £1,000?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question in so far as it gives me an opportunity to make this point: I cannot comment on the specifics and the rationale for what the Minister of Agriculture may do. That is her decision. I can comment on what I have done as Minister for Employment and Learning. Once we took the decision to freeze the fees for local students in local institutions, we had an inescapable obligation to address and manage the distortions that would arise from different fee regimes in different parts of the UK. To do otherwise would have risked a situation in which we had an influx of applications from elsewhere, resulting in our local students being either displaced and having to pay higher fees elsewhere in the UK and perhaps being lost to the Northern Ireland economy or deterred totally from going to university. If we had not acted in the way we did, we would have been looking at a very serious situation today, with Members' postbags flooded with letters from concerned parents protesting at the situation. Through the decisions we have taken, we have avoided that.

I understand — I thought I did — that the Ulster Unionists agreed with the freezing of fees in Northern Ireland, but they seem strangely unwilling to accept the logical consequences of that decision, unless they are now going to suggest otherwise and favour higher fees here and the same level of fees throughout the UK. That is very much at odds with the views of the electorate in this part of the UK.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister well knows that the SDLP was very much in favour of freezing tuition fees and, if possible, abolishing them at some stage in the future.

Minister, given that the agrifood industry is the industry that, it is hoped, will lift the economy out of recession, have you had any discussions with the Agriculture Minister about increasing the

number of places at CAFRE or the universities to meet the employment opportunities that will hopefully arise in a niche market?

Dr Farry: As regards support for the agrifood sector, we have recognised that it is one of the priority skill areas for the future evolution of the Northern Ireland economy. We have a future skills action group that is working in that area, so we recognise the absolute importance of all of that.

I also remind Mrs Kelly that, in so far as the SDLP supported the freezing of fees in Northern Ireland, it proposed to do that by taking the money out of the universities. So, we would have had the bizarre situation where we were subsidising low fees but, at the same time, funding a poorer form of education, which would have been utterly counterproductive.

Apprenticeships: High-tech Industries

8. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he has plans any to introduce a scheme along the lines of the former supported graduate apprenticeships to help leading-edge high-tech industries.

(AQO 1771/11-15)

Dr Farry: The supported graduate apprenticeship scheme was an indigenous training programme for undergraduates in Bombardier Shorts. I have been advised by the company that the scheme ended in 1994.

In terms of publicly funded higher-level apprenticeships, my Department is working with a number of sector skills councils, leading companies and training suppliers to develop and pilot an apprenticeship programme at level 4, which is at sub-degree or higher national level, in the information and communication technology and engineering sectors. The aim of that pilot programme is to support the skill requirements of our leading-edge companies in Northern Ireland and to establish progression routes for apprentices that could lead to an honours degree. Preparatory work is well under way, and it is expected that recruitment to the pilot programme in both sectors will take place later this year.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for his reply. I declare an interest as an achiever from that scheme. What the Minister has outlined will lead to the skills gap being filled in high-tech industry companies, such as Bombardier, as

there are major shortfalls in their recruitment areas, such as engineering and electronics. Will the Minister roll the programme out to companies other than just Bombardier?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary. There are two things to stress in response. First, this programme will be broader than just Bombardier. I pay tribute to Bombardier, because it is very proactive in its apprenticeship programme and works very closely with us on Apprenticeships Northern Ireland. However, this scheme will be much wider. We are piloting it in two areas, and, if it is successful, we hope to roll it out on a much wider basis.

We have a requirement for a much greater level of higher-level qualifications in Northern Ireland. That was a clear theme in the skills strategy that we launched last year. However, that does not always necessarily mean the classic degree route: there are other paths open to people that are of equal value. It is really the case that whatever fits best should be pursued.

Mrs Dobson: What steps is the Minister taking to inspire and enthuse our people at a much younger age about the opportunities and remuneration available from STEM subjects? I was very inspired by a recent visit to Bombardier, on which we were told how it had increased its uptake of female apprentices. Minister, what measures are you taking to encourage more females onto that career path?

Dr Farry: The Member raises a very valid point. It is important to highlight that we still have a long way to go. However, some important steps are being taken. We have a STEM strategy, which is a cross-departmental strategy based on a review of STEM subjects and conducted by Joanne Stuart. Bombardier was represented on the group by Gavin Campbell. We are keen to highlight the importance of people from a wide range of backgrounds and of both genders taking part in apprenticeships. Indeed, Stephanie Wilson, who was a production engineer from Bombardier, spoke at a recent event as a STEM ambassador. When I was on the Bombardier floor recently, I was pleased to see the beginnings of much greater diversity in that company's apprentices. I know that that is also the case in many other companies across Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister referred to a pilot scheme, which is very encouraging. However, does the Minister not agree that a more aggressive approach has to be taken to

the development of such skills, particularly among graduates? At this point, we should take that approach rather than simply wait for a pilot scheme to produce results.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and understand the sentiments behind it. In Northern Ireland, there is, on the one hand, a desire to be radical and innovative in public policy but equally there is a strong accountability culture and a desire to see things properly rolled out and assessed before even greater amounts of money are invested. I am not sure that this affects my Department any more than others. The House has to grapple with the wider culture in public policy in Northern Ireland. I will, however, give the assurance that I will move aggressively to follow up on the results of any pilot. Those results will also be reinforced by work that I am doing with an ICT working group involving business leaders, the colleges and universities and other Departments to see how we can better cater for the ICT sector. My skills adviser, Bill McGinnis, is conducting a scoping exercise with engineering companies on their particular skills needs to see what actions we need to take. Apprenticeships are only one part of a much wider engagement in support of those sectors.

Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis University College: Merger

9. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the proposed merger between Stranmillis University College and Queen's University Belfast.

(AQO 1772/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have already updated Members on the proposed merger in writing on four occasions and once orally on 12 September. In addition, I made a statement on teacher education issues to the Assembly on 28 November 2011. I have commissioned a two-stage study of the teacher education infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The first stage of that will be completed in the summer and the second stage in the autumn.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his reply. He stated the number of occasions on which he has provided updates. Does he accept that confusion reigns supreme around this subject? When will he take the opportunity to clarify the matter and be precise and exact about what is happening? Quite frankly, there is a lot

of uncertainty, and, with no disrespect to the Minister, I think he seems to be the author of it.

Dr Farry: I thank Lord Morrow for the opportunity to clarify the situation once again. I inherited a situation in which there was a consultation on the merger of Stranmillis and Queen's University. Indeed, the party that was the author of that consultation strategy changed its mind on what it wanted to do. Lord Morrow's party also indicated that it was not supportive of that merger going ahead.

I have stated that I am willing to move the legislation on that when there is sufficient support in the Assembly to carry that legislation. However, the issue is much broader than the potential merger of Queen's and Stranmillis. For that reason, I have announced a two-stage review of the teacher education infrastructure. The first stage is looking at the financial model behind the two teacher training colleges. The second stage will explore options for sharing that will flow from the outcome of the first stage. We expect that first stage to conclude towards the end of June.

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Multiagency Support Teams

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the success of the multiagency support teams and equivalent bodies in detecting and addressing problems which children may experience in the early stages of their education; recognises the effective partnerships that are in place between the health service, schools and parents to address the needs of children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work closely with the Minister of Education to review the model of service provision and expand the service to the schools and nurseries which are not currently part of the scheme. — [Mr Beggs.]

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful for the opportunity to hear the views of Members on this issue. I fully support the principle of multiagency teams working together in the interests of children. I emphasise that I continue to be committed to providing the best possible services to those in our communities who are most in need.

The use of multiagency and multidisciplinary approaches is in line with policy across all Departments, and I am fully supportive of that principle where it can deliver better outcomes and where appropriate resources are available. The work of multiagency support teams, or multidisciplinary teams as they are commonly known, is exceptionally important in the early identification of difficulties that children are encountering with their development or problems that may prevent them achieving their full potential. If not addressed, such problems may inhibit their making a full and constructive contribution to their communities and society as a whole.

Multidisciplinary working and close co-operation between the various agencies allow us to help improve the life chances of children and young people through enhancing educational development and fostering their health, well-being and social inclusion. They also allow us to make sure that the limited resources available are used in the most effective manner and deliver the best outcomes for our children.

The multidisciplinary teams to which the motion refers are an example of health and social care and education sectors working together for the benefit of children. The teams, which have been funded by my Department since 2007, are run by health and social care trusts, in close collaboration with their respective education and library boards. They work in nursery preschool settings, primary and special schools. Access to services provided by the scheme has largely been through expressions of interest by individual schools.

I am advised that the teams are operating in schools across all trust areas, although not all schools have signed up to the process. Trusts determine the composition of the teams in their areas according to need. In trusts where not all schools are yet participating, plans are in place to ensure that access is optimised through the issuing of further invitations or a review of particular service models to ensure that the resources are used effectively. However, there are costs associated with expanding and extending the service. Information provided by the trusts indicates that potential additional annual costs would be in the region of £900,000. It will be of interest to the Member who proposed the motion that around £500,000 of that money applies to the Northern Trust area, with the other four trusts responsible for the remainder.

The pace of inclusion of all schools, other than post-primary schools, will be largely dependent on available resources. I recognise and applaud the significant work already being carried out by health and education professionals, together with parents, in addressing the needs of children, and that will continue. I am happy to give my commitment to working in close collaboration with the Minister of Education, where his special educational needs review or other initiatives address that area.

Indeed, I met him last week to discuss a range of common interest issues and the potential for further joint working between our Departments and their various agencies. I believe that such co-operation is essential for the benefit of children who are most in need and for the best use of the limited resources that we have.

However, as I have said, rolling out the work of the multidisciplinary teams to all relevant schools will require significant investment and service reform, particularly given the fact that the commissioning direction targets in other

parts of paediatric allied health professional services remain very challenging. With that in mind, the health and social care board is carrying out a review of the work that multidisciplinary teams already undertake. An initial scoping of current provision has been completed and is being analysed. It is intended that that will provide the review with a baseline of services in each team and assist in the exploration of any service improvement to allow a regional model to be developed.

In addition to the work of the multidisciplinary teams, my Department is leading on the development of an autism strategy and working closely with all Departments, including the Department of Education, to find ways to identify and assess those who may have autism, and to improve the service and support. The input of the education sector is, of course, essential in developing better services for young people who have autism, as, quite often, the nursery or school setting is where it may be identified initially.

On 29 February, I launched the allied health professions strategy. A key theme of that strategy is the promotion of person-centred practices and care, which put the service user — in this case, the child and their parent or carer — at the centre of decision-making about their treatment. The strategy notes that positive partnerships are essential for allied health professionals to play their role as leaders and members of multidisciplinary and multiagency teams. A good example is the excellent partnership working between speech and language therapists and schools to achieve positive outcomes for primary 1 children, to give them the best start in life. Such co-operation has even enabled teachers to provide ongoing support to children with communication difficulties by using techniques demonstrated by therapists.

Co-operation also extends to the special educational needs review that is being taken forward by the Department of Education. My officials are working closely with the Department of Education in taking that forward. Putting the child at the centre and ensuring that their needs are identified and addressed should be the focus of all of their efforts. That should apply equally in high-level policy development and in specific co-operation between disciplines, to ensure that there is the earliest intervention and support possible to help an individual child achieve their full potential.

I thank Members for their contributions in support of multidisciplinary working. All Members who spoke outlined the significant benefits, for children and wider society, of Departments and agencies sharing this task. I believe that we can do much more by working in a co-operative way across the Departments than we can individually. Therefore, I am totally committed to ensuring that that is the case. I can confirm that my officials and I will continue to work closely with the Department of Education on all of those issues, where appropriate.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to colleagues for taking part in the debate and for the remarks made. I begin by paying tribute to my colleague Mr Beggs. He is no stranger to campaigning or to getting better outcomes for children and young people. He has led on issues like this for many years and, no doubt, will continue to campaign tirelessly on these issues and, where he sees good practice, try to roll it out. That is the basis of today's debate and why we have been passionate about putting it on the agenda. We want to make the case for rolling out in all areas the good practice that we see being carried out in some areas, and see where we can pick up and make sure that no children fall between the gaps in our services and are left behind.

I agree with Mr Beggs that it would be great for that to be rolled out to all schools. The school is the one place that we know catches all children. Notwithstanding that, I will come later to Ms Gildernew's remarks about wanting to have this happen upstream to allow intervention at an earlier stage, which my party supports. We have always been keen on interventions being made at as early a stage as possible across the board.

Ms Gildernew: Does the Member not agree that, if we leave intervention until a child is four or five, there will be children going to school who are not suitable for an educational environment? That was pointed out, in this Building, by a renowned economist a number of years ago.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to Ms Gildernew for that. I agree that it is vital that intervention is made as early as possible. The difficulty, as Mr Beggs highlighted, is that school is the one place where we are guaranteed to catch all the children, because of the compulsory nature of education. That is the one time that we know that we can get all the pupils by using the school system to identify them. If we can come up with a better way, we will adopt it, and

we are looking at other programmes that would allow us to make earlier interventions. In your contribution, Ms Gildernew, you talked about health visitors. We would, of course, be very receptive to that option. It is about making sure that no child falls through the system, or, as you quite rightly pointed out, is left behind or left struggling when he or she reaches school. Other Members, such as Mr McCarthy, mentioned that people not in education, employment or training have been left behind. At that stage, way down the track, there is much more pressure on our criminal justice system. We must make sure that no pupil falls through the system. Of course, we would support that happening at a much earlier stage.

The one theme that comes through from all the contributions today is the support for early intervention and for the co-operation and collaborative approach between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education. Everyone who spoke agreed on that. Mr Wells talked about the co-operation between the two Departments and early intervention. He said that, if we were to roll out this model to all schools, it would, somehow, cost about £1 million. However, I recall the same Mr Wells saying, as recently as a year ago, that we had plenty of money in the health budget.

Look at the savings that Ms Gildernew and others talked about. If one pound spent on early intervention saves £20 down the line, it suggests that we may be a little penny wise and pound foolish. We have to look at that and change the mindset of Departments so that they start to engage and think like that.

Michaela Boyle talked about improving life chances, which is key to the difference that this will make to the lives of our children and young people down the line and right across the board. It is about improving life chances and providing opportunities that might not be afforded if we do not identify early the issues and complex needs of children. Their issues and needs are being picked up by these programmes throughout Northern Ireland, which is important. Ms Boyle talked about the referral criteria and suggested that they might need to be reviewed. She called for even greater co-operation between the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Services, and she strongly supported expanding the existing scheme.

Mark Durkan talked about the benefits to schools and the enhanced support for parents, as well as children. He wanted to extend the age to which we support children.

Mr McCarthy talked about children being our greatest asset. I am sure that every Member of the House agrees with that. He talked about other ways in which we could help, such as providing breakfast in schools and tackling obesity in young people. Mr McCarthy and other Members talked about the valuable work that Sure Start and Home-Start do across the board with young people.

Of course, Sure Start is not available in every area, because it is targeted at areas of deprivation. We have good Home-Start projects, particularly across my constituency of South Down, but, again, funding is a huge issue. Without funding, we do not know for how long some of the groups can stay together and stay active.

3.45 pm

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member will know that we visited a Home-Start establishment not that long ago. The main complaint that we heard there concerned the lack of funding and how delay can prevent it from being able to plan the provision of good facilities for Home-Start. The important point is to get the funding in place quickly.

Mr McCallister: That is a key point for a lot of community-based projects. Too much time is spent looking into funding, but if projects are doing good work and have a proven track record, we should let them get on with it and encourage them.

Pam Brown spoke about the early identification of problems. The key value of early intervention, whether it is done upstream or at the stage under discussion, is the identification of problems and getting support in place. As the Minister agreed in his contribution, the difference that that can make is enormous. That is the main advantage of such programmes, and that is why we appeal for it to be rolled out.

I referred to Ms Gildernew's remarks earlier, but the figure is worth reiterating. She said that £1 spent early can save us £20 later on. That is a huge sum of money and a huge payback for the Government, but it is also a huge payback for the young people and families involved through there being vastly improved outcomes for all concerned.

Mr Gordon Dunne spoke about the multiagency approach at ministerial level. He made a point

about co-operation in dealing with autism, and such co-operation across Departments is something that I would like to see happening. One stalling block seems to be the continuing wrangle over whether we support the Middletown Centre for Autism. The costs associated with running the centre have to be addressed, and resources must be delivered where they are needed and where they can be of best use.

My colleague Mr Swann gave many positive examples of good practice being rolled out. He emphasised the difference that could be made if we rolled the scheme out to every school. He mentioned the percentage of parents and teachers who said that the scheme had made a vast difference to their life. Some 92% of parents and pupils believed that the scheme had made a huge improvement, and that is a pretty impressive statistic for any scheme to achieve.

Mr Agnew reminded us that he intends to bring a private Member's Bill to the House. We look forward to that when it arrives. He supported early intervention and a collaborative approach across Departments. The Minister agrees with that collaborative approach and wants to see it continue.

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McCallister: He spoke about allied health professionals and the excellent work done between speech and language therapists and schools. That must continue. Of course, we are all greatly concerned about how the special educational needs review will develop.

I thank colleagues for their contributions in support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the success of the multiagency support teams and equivalent bodies in detecting and addressing problems which children may experience in the early stages of their education; recognises the effective partnerships that are in place between the health service, schools and parents to address the needs of children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work closely with the Minister of Education to review the model of service provision and expand the service to the schools and nurseries which are not currently part of the scheme.

Adjourned at 3.49 pm.



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