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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 4 November 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Child Support and Claims and Payments (Miscellaneous Amendments and Change to the Minimum Amount of Liability) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

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

*That the Child Support and Claims and
Payments (Miscellaneous Amendments and
Change to the Minimum Amount of Liability)
Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be
approved.*

The regulations are made under the Child Support (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 and the Social Security Administration (Northern Ireland) Act 1992. The regulations make consequential amendments to various statutes arising from the increase to the flat rate of child support maintenance from £5 to £7. The regulations also make a number of amendments relating to the rules for the calculation of child support maintenance and variations.

I will briefly outline the purpose of the regulations. The minimum amount of liability, commonly known as the flat rate of child support maintenance, is the amount of maintenance a non-resident parent — that is, a parent whose children are not living with them — is liable to pay if they have a weekly income of £100 or less or they are in receipt of certain benefits. It is intended that the flat rate will increase from £5 to £7 later this month when the new 2012 child maintenance scheme is opened to all applicants.

The main policy intention of the regulations is to restore the flat rate to its 2003 real value. At £7, the increased flat rate will be broadly the same as when it was first introduced. For

example, when the flat rate was introduced in 2003, £5 represented 9% of the benefit of a single person over 25 on jobseeker's allowance. The annual uprating of benefits means that that same £5 represents just 7% of the benefit of a single person over 25 on jobseeker's allowance. A flat rate of £7 represents 10% of the benefit of a single person over 25 on jobseeker's allowance, thereby restoring the value of the 2003 flat rate. The proposed flat rate increase will also amend the percentages applied to the reduced rate of child support maintenance that is payable if the non-resident parent has an income of less than £200 but more than £100. This means that the maintenance liability of parents on the reduced rate will rise to ensure a smooth increase in liabilities between the flat rate and the basic rate, which is used for parents earning £200 or more.

The regulations make miscellaneous amendments to variations. Variations are the rules that allow for a deviation from the usual child maintenance calculation rules in certain limited circumstances. A variation could increase or decrease a child maintenance liability. For example, if a parent receives unearned income from property, savings and investments, or casual earnings, that could increase their liability. On the other hand, if the parent incurs special expenses, such as the cost of travelling to see a child, that could reduce the liability. The changes in the regulations affect only those variations that increase liability.

The proposed changes will allow my Department to determine unearned income by reference to information supplied by the parent on the most recent tax year. That option will be utilised only where information cannot be obtained from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. This change will allow for a more efficient means of obtaining reliable information on unearned income and will, therefore, provide a more accurate maintenance calculation that will be fairer to and better for the children. In addition, the amendments will clarify that, even when a variation is agreed, the resulting maintenance calculation cannot be less than

the flat rate. This will maintain a balance between reducing liability to take account of special expenses and ensuring that children continue to benefit from some financial support. A non-resident parent on the flat rate cannot apply for a special expenses variation.

The regulations will ensure an appropriate increase in the amount of maintenance that flows to children. They will also provide for a more efficient and accurate variations regime.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I take this opportunity to apologise to the House for failing to be in my place to ask a topical question two weeks ago. Thank you for your indulgence.

At its meeting on 27 June 2013, and subsequently at its meeting on 12 September, the Committee considered the SL1 pertaining to the statutory rule. As the Minister indicated, the regulations will come into operation on 25 November 2013, and we are being asked to approve that. The Committee has confirmed its support for the regulations and asks the House to do likewise.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased that there was consensus at the Social Development Committee. I thank the Chair and his colleagues on the Committee for the positive way in which they have dealt with this.

The regulations mainly deal with the increase of the flat rate from £5 to £7. They will provide for a more efficient and accurate variations regime. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Child Support and Claims and Payments (Miscellaneous Amendments and Change to the Minimum Amount of Liability) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Committee Business

Report on the Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport Delivery Structures

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes in which to propose and 15 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport Delivery Structures; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with the relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations.

At the outset, I want to condemn whoever was responsible for leaking the draft report to the press. It was discourteous to the House, to Members of the Assembly, to the Committee and to the witnesses who gave of their time to contribute to the inquiry. Importantly, Mr Speaker, they have shown total disregard and contempt towards the employees of Translink, who have had to endure the rumour and innuendo arising from the inaccurate reporting of the leaked document, and who have been told that their jobs are on the line because the Committee wants to privatise the services that they provide. I want to nail that spurious accusation. At no time during the inquiry or in the reporting of the Committee findings and recommendations have I, the Deputy Chair or the Committee called for Translink to be privatised. The words “privatise” or “privatisation” do not appear in the body of the Committee report for the simple reason that they were not used. They have been used mainly by the press, not the Committee. I will, therefore, clarify what the Committee actually said and do so in the forum in which it should have been done in the first place — this House.

Paragraphs 36 to 48 set out the Committee logic in calling for more competition in the delivery of public transport. Those paragraphs state very clearly that the 1967 and 2011 Transport Acts state that the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company provides most of the public transport requirement. The Acts do

not, however, state that all public transport should be provided by the holding company. Indeed, the 2011 Act specifically endorses the concept of competition, in that it allows for new service delivery arrangements to contract with public transport operators. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) sat in front of the Committee on many occasions and cited the fact that competition is permissible under the legislation. The Department's publications, in the guise of its strategic business case, stated:

"Research conducted for the European Commission suggests that the introduction of competition can generate cost savings of 10–20% when only minimal restructuring of the industry is required. Savings of 35% or more have been achieved where greater restructuring was required."

The public transport reform consultation summary document sought to maximise:

"efficiency and value for money through the use of benchmarking, continuous improvement of services and, where necessary, competitive tendering for some transport services."

The Committee undertook study visits to Dublin, Glasgow and Arnhem, where it experienced at first hand the positive effects of regulated competition in systems that saw the likes of community transport organisations freed from the shackles of inane and outdated licensing regulations similar to ours and playing an integral part in securing jobs in public transport services by linking more people to the core networks, thus creating more demand. In Dublin, the Luas system is franchised to a private operator but regulated by government.

We have the legislation in place, a Department that repeatedly heralds the potential for competition and examples of positive competitive provision being applied daily in an efficient and effective manner. How does the Department deliver against its legislation and its strategic business case? It awards Translink a 10-year contract that will run into hundreds of millions of pounds and, on top of that, promises it a lucrative contract to deliver Belfast rapid transit. Where is the opportunity for competition in that? Where is the drive to effect meaningful efficiency? It is nowhere, because the Department has taken the easy option. It had the opportunity to make a real difference but, I suggest, chickened out for convenience sake.

12.15 pm

Yes, the Committee has called for competition. Yes, we have suggested that a means of doing that is to bundle together routes, profitable and unprofitable, and offer them to the market, a market in which Translink is protected by law and is secure in the knowledge that it is guaranteed the majority or most of the provision. That would be a competitive market, not a monopoly or a privatised market. The Committee believes that this, either through franchising or competitive tendering, is the best way to effect real and meaningful efficiencies in Translink to the benefit of the users of these services.

I move on to a further example of the Department saying one thing and then doing something totally different. I refer to Transport Northern Ireland. At the Committee Stage of the 2011 Transport Bill, the Department came to the previous Committee and proclaimed:

"The main new element in that structure is the agency, which will be a part of DRD and will be responsible to the Minister and the Assembly for the delivery of the proposed transport functions."

The establishment of an executive agency within DRD was considered to be fundamental to the success of public transport reform proposals. The outline business case for public transport reform stated that the agency would result in benefits such as efficiency and improved service. It envisaged:

"a single client body with expertise in the specification of integrated transport services and facilities, and in procurement and contract management ... to achieve and sustain the best possible value for money over the long term".

The Department emphasised that it would be an independent body that would bring stakeholders together. Importantly, the proposed agency model was consulted on and agreed to by the previous Minister, the Department and the key stakeholders. However, and for reasons that I hope the Minister will explain, that is not what we have. The Minister chose to go against the advice that his officials provided to his predecessor and ignore the approach agreed by his Department and the very stakeholders that the agency was supposed to try to bring together. The Minister chose to disregard the model presented to the previous Committee and the House during the passing of the 2011 Transport Act.

Instead, we have Roads Service with a few other bits and pieces of policy bolted on and a

new name, Transport Northern Ireland. The Minister might say that it is something completely different, but the reality is that it is still Roads Service. It does not have the experience or expertise that is necessary. Its ethos and branding do not give hope that it will champion public transport. It does not provide the clarity of role and function to which stakeholders attached so much importance during the consultation. It does not provide the coordination and integration that is necessary. It fails to rectify the conflicting anomaly whereby the Minister is the public owner, policymaker and part regulator of public transport in Northern Ireland.

The Committee is in agreement that the new Transport Northern Ireland model falls significantly short of the proposed and agreed agency model. Having stressed the need for any new body to be independent, the Department, without consultation, has now implemented a model that fails to provide the independence claimed for the agency model. The Committee is also in agreement that the revised arrangements are not consistent with the goal of maximising the efficient and effective delivery of public transport legislative and policy objectives.

The Committee has recommended, therefore, that the Minister and the Department revert to the agreed agency model as described during the public transport reform process and presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the previous Committee for Regional Development during the passing of the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

In addition, we made suggestions about the skill sets that would be required to effectively challenge the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and Translink.

I will now turn to governance in the holding company and Translink. As I indicated, the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 established the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company as a public authority charged with the delivery of public transport services. The holding company delivers on that responsibility through three subsidiary companies — Northern Ireland Rail, Citybus, which is branded as Metro, and Ulsterbus — under the overall brand name of Translink. The chairmanship of the holding company is a non-executive position appointed by government and, like the other directors, is appointed for a renewable term of three years. The group chief executive and chief operating officer of the subsidiary companies are also members of the holding company board.

The Committee is not content that the current holding company structure is fit for purpose in delivering a modern, integrated public transport service. Conclusions that were formed during the public transport reform process indicated that there was a distinct lack of clarity about the holding company's relationship with the Department, its three subsidiary companies and its other commercial concerns. The Committee is also concerned that the group chief executive and chief operating officer sit as board members and that, despite significant investment since devolution in 2007, the Northern Ireland Audit Office does not have access to the holding company or Translink accounts or those of the subsidiary companies.

We have recommended, therefore, that the Minister commission an urgent and fundamental review of the holding company structures against requirements of existing and developing EU transport regulations, the Programme for Government and the investment strategy for Northern Ireland commitments, as well as 'Ensuring a Sustainable Transport Future: A New Approach to Regional Transportation', to ensure that it is the most efficient and effective model to meet Northern Ireland's future public transport requirements. In addition, we are agreed that, as an additional layer of scrutiny, the group chief executive and chief operating officer cease to be full members of the board of the holding company, instead leaving themselves accountable to the board for operational matters. The Committee is agreed that, given the significant levels of public grant and subsidy to the holding company and Translink, the Minister should assess the legislative considerations that need to be put in place to allow the Audit Office full access to the holding company accounts and to those of the three subsidiary companies.

In undertaking the inquiry, the Committee hoped that it might unravel some of the common misunderstandings about the governance of Translink, in particular its relationship with the Department and the operation of the three subsidiary companies. We also wanted to see whether those structures were fit for purpose in delivering modern, integrated transport. Significantly, the conclusion that the Committee reached does not match the aspirations that were expressed at the outset of the inquiry. The Committee believes that the relationship between the Department, the holding company and Translink, often described by Members as "cosy", is not sufficiently challenging, due to the departmental governance model and the absence of relevant and key experience and expertise in the Department.

We are not content that the proposed service level agreement meets with the requirement for a public service contract as defined in European regulations. That could leave the Department open to infraction proceedings. We are also opposed to the automatic renewal and award of contracts, which limits competition and disincentivises the effective delivery of transport in Northern Ireland.

The Committee welcomes the opportunity to debate the issue in the House today, as it is the proper place. I move the motion.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I welcome the review. I want to echo the Chair's words and deal with the media reporting earlier this summer on the recommendations.

Reports were not only misleading but misrepresented the Committee's position. At no time did the Committee, as the Chair said, agree to a privatisation of our transport system. The terms of reference set out by the Committee have clear objectives for improving transport solutions for all of society.

It is time to review the public transport system and who delivers it, to maximise the organisation and delivery structures and to improve efficiencies. Nowhere in the terms of reference was the concept of privatisation mentioned. In the 21st century, public transport should be people's first choice, not their last resort.

Our public transport legislation is outdated: it is over 40 years since the last major review. The recommendations, if implemented, will ensure the provision of a customer-focused, high-quality and integrated public transport system that will put a greater focus on delivery and efficiency and on the provision of affordable services that are responsive to local needs.

Public transport should continue to operate within a regulated system, and Translink, the publicly owned transport operator, must remain the main provider of public transport. However, procurement needs to take into account alternative providers, including taxi firms and community transport. I am talking about transport providers that provide not-for-profit services.

Until the public transport network is tendered, we will remain within the constraints of a system installed many years ago. For example, community transport providers are excluded because of the current tendering conditions. Another example of where tendering could be

opened up is for the West Belfast Taxi Association: the link routes in the west of the city from the new rapid transport system will hopefully be in operation in the next couple of years.

The public transport reform document of 2009 stated that there should be a new organisation and new governance arrangements involved in the setting-up of a new departmental public transport agency. That agency would be responsible for specifying service requirements and securing provision for public transport operators who would deliver the service. In my opinion, that would be the best model to follow to enable the implementation of the reforms needed and to ensure that improvements continue over the long term.

Sinn Féin is against any proposals that will break up and privatise the public transport system. Doing so would devastate a system that has escaped the ravages endured by sectors elsewhere. Privatising or selling off profitable routes, and practices geared to the interests of competing companies rather than the customer, would be to the detriment of isolated, dependent and at-risk groups. Private sector operators will prioritise the acquisition of lucrative routes and seek to restrain scheduling in unprofitable periods. That is not the way to go.

That having been said, we recognise that there are major difficulties associated with the current management of Translink. In particular, there is a real lack of accountability and transparency.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the report. I take the opportunity to pay tribute to the men and women who have manned our public services for the past 40 years. That is part of a proud heritage that every single member of the Committee acknowledges. No member of the Committee would want to do anything to undermine the courage of those people who, in carrying out their duties, have had their buses, and at one time trains, burned, and so on. Even today they are still running risks.

The report is a statutory requirement of the Committee: it is our duty to publish it. I hope that the report has a fair wind and is tracked to ensure that the recommendations contained in it are debated and addressed. I think that that is fair.

12.30 pm

Thanks to new investment, technology and communication systems, public transport has

improved immensely, but has it met the new challenges? Has it put all of that new technology to best use to ensure that the people who use our public transport can use it more often and more efficiently? I believe that the answer is no, not because of the men and women I have referred to who drive the buses and trains, but because senior management has not matched what is available.

Where new investment has been made in public transport, the results have been remarkable. I make no apology for, yet again, singling out the Belfast/Derry railway, which, today, is carrying more passengers than the Belfast/Dublin Enterprise, which, in itself, is a tremendous public service.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: I will indeed.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure the Member will want to join me in putting on record that it was this Minister who ensured the viability and security into the future of that particular line.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Dallat: Mr Speaker, I am fed up acknowledging the Minister on this one. I am now on to the bypass and the Derry railway station. Even today, the split in transport is 20:80: 20% into public transport and 80% into roads. I think that that needs to be seriously addressed.

The Assembly has made some good achievements. One of the best was the introduction of the senior citizens' passes. However, what good is a senior citizen's pass if public transport is not integrated? The Committee travelled to Cardiff, Glasgow and Dublin — some members even went to the Netherlands — to see how that could be best achieved. I am convinced that public transport can be made more attractive to many more people, particularly those senior citizens living in the rural areas that I represent who find that it is not much good if you cannot get to the main line stations or the bus terminus where the transport is.

The Chairman has covered a couple of the points that were causing concern to the staff. I am glad that he referred to two acts that ensure that public transport is largely provided by Translink and not by private enterprise. This study is not about privatising Translink; it is about ensuring that the £200 million that goes

into public transport every year is better invested for the people who use it.

The Assembly will produce reports that are controversial. Hopefully, we are not nodding dogs and that we can examine how best to use public money and track it from source to where it is spent. It is not only the Public Accounts Committee that has a responsibility for doing that. Every Committee has a responsibility to do it, and, in this case, the Department for Regional Development has done that.

The Committee certainly questioned a 10-year contract with Translink, because it is concerned that it would, yet again, stifle the opportunities that exist to develop integrated transport, not just through a little pilot scheme down in Dungannon, but across the whole of Northern Ireland. It is working successfully in Dublin, Cardiff, Glasgow and other places. Why not here? I know that people might be concerned that Translink does not get a 10-year contract; that in itself would cause instability in the industry. All of those things need to be addressed. Of course, they will be, because, hopefully, this report is the beginning of a process that will satisfy everyone, particularly the people who use public transport, whether they are young or old, and, most importantly, the people whom I began my speech on — those who currently man it.

Mr Speaker: Time is almost gone.

Mr Dallat: Thank you.

Mr Hussey: I begin by apologising to the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development for not being here at the start of the debate. I support Mr Dallat's praise for those who worked for Translink during some of the most horrible times in our history and congratulate the Minister for Regional Development on the Belfast to Londonderry rail line. Mr Dallat was incorrect when he mentioned some other place — it is Belfast to Londonderry.

The inquiry was beneficial in that it provided a forum for discussion of the issues. One of the main points in the terms of reference was that the inquiry should shed some light on the legal and governance relationship between the Department for Regional Development and the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo), better known as Translink. The relationship has often been subject to rumour, misunderstandings and ambiguity. The inquiry, at least, offered the opportunity to explore that, and I hope that it has done so. As a member of

the Committee for Regional Development, I welcomed the inquiry. Unsurprisingly, I am not as content with some of the report's recommendations as others.

The first recommendation raises the issue that the Minister for Regional Development is both a policymaker and part regulator of public transport. I accept that that may raise some procedural eyebrows but ask what the alternatives are. An agency model is certainly an idea, but I have concerns about the establishment of yet another almost arm's-length body that would obviously require its own administrative set-up costs. There may be issues with DRD holding direct responsibility for public transport, but my opinion, for what it is worth, is that it is better to have an Executive Minister who can be held directly accountable for it than not. We must also remember that administering public transport in Northern Ireland is no small task. Just last week, the newly published Northern Ireland road and rail transport statistics revealed that a weekly average of 1.38 million public bus passenger journeys were made in the April to June 2013 quarter.

The main recommendation on which I wish to focus is the report's fourth, which explicitly calls on the Department to offer private operators the opportunity to deliver our public transport requirement. I have major concerns about this recommendation, which I simply cannot support. It may be that Belfast and the larger towns would get away unscathed from such a development, but, in constituencies such as mine, services would, effectively, disappear overnight. It is a simple reality that rural routes are often not economically sustainable. Although I do not always support state subsidisation — that is a good word — the present situation allows Translink to absorb some losses on those rural routes by making a profit on those more fruitful. How would rural routes be protected in this proposed new model? In my opinion, they simply would not.

The inquiry managed to move the debate to the privatisation of Translink. I cannot support that, and I will look with interest at how other parties in the House respond on the issue.

Mr Spratt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hussey: I would rather not at this moment, thank you. If I had to get up, I would not be able to get down again.

The inquiry was useful and raised a number of points worth further discussion. I thank the Committee staff for their usual dedication and

the important role that they played during the inquiry. Unfortunately, I cannot support the full report.

Mr Dickson: I also thank the Committee staff and Chair for the way in which the report was prepared. It was a very professional exercise indeed. I should also point out that I am no longer a member of the Committee, having been replaced by my colleague Mr Kieran McCarthy. However, I was very much involved in the formation of the inquiry and the investigations that took place.

I will pick out a number of the report's key recommendations. One concerns the agency model, and other Members referred to that. The Alliance Party firmly believes that the Department needs to look seriously at the issue of independence raised in the report. It has to answer questions about what exactly that body is, what it has been doing since it was established and what difference it has made. We received notification that it was coming into existence, but, as the report says, we were not consulted and have received no information about its activities since it was created.

Another recommendation in the report is that the Department should recruit qualified and experienced personnel, and the Committee requested information about the limited expertise in local transport planning, contract specification, performance and contract management, and fare regulation. We note the intention to procure an expert transport modelling and planning service, yet it is disappointing that that did not begin some time ago. How we are expected to have an efficient, effective and coordinated transport system with no transport planners in place is somewhat of a mystery, and it was a mystery to the Committee.

I support the Committee's call for investment in appropriately qualified and experienced personnel. I also call on the Transport Holding Company to afford employees appropriate opportunities to feed back into the system ways in which their organisation could be run better. In recent days, I have spoken to drivers, other Translink personnel and their trade unions, who shared their frustrations with me. They know the routes, the systems and their jobs, yet rarely is their advice on how improvements could be made taken into account. By and large, it is ignored.

It is also worth pointing out that we should completely debunk the notion that the report is anything to do with the privatisation of public transport in Northern Ireland. It is about

providing appropriate competition and ensuring that Translink delivers the best possible public transport system for Northern Ireland.

The balance between public transport and roads has been referred to, and it has been mentioned that the split is somewhere in the region of 80:20. The recommendation in the report is to give a greater proportion to public transport, which is an argument that I made throughout my time on the Committee.

I am glad that the Committee is behind the report, because when I raised the imbalance with the former Finance Minister earlier this year, I was told not to complain because I support the upgrade of the A2. That was a poor response. This is a long-standing problem and little has been done to rectify it.

The Committee took evidence on the Programme for Government commitments on 12 December 2011. Concerns were expressed that only 14% of DRD's capital spending was allocated to public transport, when the regional transportation strategy states that there should be a 65:35 split between roads and public transport. The Minister will probably come back on that and say that more money has been allocated since then through monitoring rounds. However, our public transport network should not be thrown scraps from the tables of other Departments. There needs to be an increase through a long-term commitment, and that has to be demonstrated through an appropriate budget.

Considerably less is spent on public transport per person in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, and all too often it is sliced more than other areas when cuts are made. That is not to take away from the welcome investment in buses, trains and Wi-Fi in recent years, but, if we want to see a major shift towards sustainable transport, we need a serious policy that is backed by serious investment. Regrettably, for the report and those who compiled it —

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr Dallat: I know that the Member has left the Committee, but would he agree that, in his experience, a very good relationship has developed between the Committee, the Department and Translink that can only result in a better public transport service for those who want to use it.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you. I wholeheartedly agree with Mr Dallat in that respect. If that relationship is built on, we will be able to deliver a quality public transport system, which will allow us to move into those rural and difficult-to-get-at areas and allow people to connect to the public transport system. The Committee saw innovative ways in other places where that is being achieved.

The challenge is now to the Minister to take up the report. I encourage him to take the comments in the report that he may feel are critical and those that he may feel are positive and run with them. He should also work robustly with the Committee to deliver on the recommendations of a report that I genuinely believe has the potential to deliver a quality public transport system for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton: The relationship between the Department and Translink is not sufficiently challenging due to the Department's governance model and the absence of relevant and key experience and expertise in the Department. Members are not content that the proposed service level agreements meet the requirement for a public sector contract that is defined in the regulations and feel that they could leave the Department open to infraction proceedings.

12.45 pm

I would recommend that the Minister and the Department revert to the agreed agency model as described during the public transport reform process and as presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the previous Committee for Regional Development during the passing of the Transport Act 2011. That would rectify the conflicting abnormalities, whereby the Minister is the public owner, policymaker and part regulator of public transport.

The Transport Act further protected the Translink position as a monopoly, ensuring that it would deliver most of the public transport requirements. That was presented as a defence by departmental officials on a number of occasions during the inquiry and the subsequent evidence sessions on the proposed new contract to Translink; namely, that the previous Committee and the House had passed the Transport Act. However, as previously stated, Members voted the Act through on the basis that an independent agency would be in

place to ensure appropriate segregation to avoid the situation where the Minister is the public owner, policymaker and part regulator of public transport.

I would also recommend that, given the significant levels of public grant and subsidies to Translink, the Minister assesses what legislative considerations need to be put in place to allow the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) full access to NITHCo's accounts and those of the three sub-companies. We are not content that the current NITHCo structure is fit for purpose to deliver a modern integrated public transport service. Conclusions formed during the public transport reform process indicated that there was a distinct lack of clarity with regard to NITHCo's relationship with the Department, its three sub-companies and its other commercial concerns.

Based on the Department's preferred cost-effectiveness measures, that is, operating costs per passenger, there is a considerable gap between the performance of Translink and the performance of operators in Wales and in some non-metropolitan areas of England, even after adjusting for costs involved in delivering certain head office authority functions within Translink. The differential in costs per passenger between Translink and comparable areas has shown little sign of narrowing in recent years. The cost-effectiveness of Translink is undoubtedly affected by a public service obligation whereby it is required to provide a comprehensive network of routes and services across Northern Ireland, many of which attract low passenger volumes. That is illustrated by the evidence provided by Translink, which indicates that 85% of its routes are unprofitable. That means that they have to be cross-subsidised by a small number of profitable routes from Translink's other commercial activities and from the capital subsidy from DRD.

I do not support the privatisation of Translink but am happy to explore how the rapid transport system and the bus hubs can be funded. I, however, do not support any situation that would place Translink in financial difficulties or lead to any job losses.

Finally, I am annoyed that the Committee has been accused of calling for the privatisation of Translink. That is simply not true. Nor have the Committee reports even mentioned Translink staff's pensions, pay or conditions, which some people from the union said on Facebook that we had discussed as well.

I am also unhappy with the make-up of the membership of the NITHCo board, which

includes the group's chief executive, the chief operating officer of the subsidiary companies and other members of the NITHCo board. Are there any ordinary workers from the coalface or even a member of the union on the board? As far as I am aware, the answer is no. I believe that that needs to be rectified.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion. Obviously, the current structures that we are looking at are not fit for purpose. That was identified during the public transport reform process in 2009, during the inquiry and during the previous inquiry that we carried out during the year into the better use of public transport.

Quite a lot of this has been covered, but I want to focus on one of the recommendations, which is the proposal to revert to the agreed agency model, and which was identified during the reform process in 2009. Much of that process is reflected in the Transport Act 2011. During that extensive process, which was a product of extensive consultation, the agency was considered crucial for an effective transport system.

The idea is to embed the agency within DRD. It would, effectively, rest in a three-tiered system between the Department and Translink, with Translink having responsibility for delivery. The agency model that we are looking at was envisaged to include functions such as operational policy and have a panel of people with specialist skills in planning, procurement, research, market regulation and many other matters. That should have been set up in mid-2011. Had that been done, it would have enabled Translink to focus mostly on delivery. Members voted for the Transport Bill in 2011 on the basis that the agency would be in place to ensure the segregation of roles and responsibilities.

I want to touch on the topic of privatisation, which we reject. We do not support privatisation at all and the privatisation of Translink was not in the inquiry. It should be noted, however, that, in the Transport Act 2011, which was passed by the Assembly and became law in March 2011, opportunities are envisaged for operators to apply for permits within a regulatory framework. During the inquiry, we heard from organisations such as the West Belfast Taxi Association and the Community Transport Association (CTA) that they would like to be able to tender for routes in certain areas to complement the existing public transport system. Equally, that would apply to hard-to-reach rural areas such as west Tyrone, where I am from.

I support the Committee's view that the new Transport NI model that has been set up falls short of the agency model that was envisaged during the reform process. It does not currently have the capacity to meet the goal of efficient and effective delivery of public transport. During the inquiry, information from the Department proved to the Committee that there is a dearth of skills in Transport NI, compared with what was envisaged in the agency model.

I support the motion and reiterate the call to revert to the model that was identified and agreed during the transport reform process in 2009.

Mrs Hale: I welcome this debate on a very important issue for the future of transport structures in Northern Ireland. Like my colleague Mr Spratt, I wish to record my disappointment that the contents of the report were leaked to the press. It is important for the very function of government to be able to have a proper debate on any embargoed report before it enters the public arena. I, too, condemn those responsible because they have shown total disregard for this House and Translink staff.

I welcome the report. The inquiry allowed the Committee to examine whether Translink's structures are fit for purpose to deliver a modern, integrated and efficient transport service for Northern Ireland. I, too, share the concerns of many Members that the 2011 Act is being used to ensure that Translink is the preferred public transport operator, preventing competitive tendering for new or additional services. This means that Translink will continue to provide the majority of public transport requirements but will be required, like all bidders, to show value for money and efficiency as part of the tendering process.

We must be careful because transport deregulation can cause issues such as turf wars between operators that lead only to short-term benefits. However, at least it means the prospect of operators nipping at each other's heels, preventing comfortable inertia. I also accept that, in backing such a stance, we must be careful that operators do not make a dive for only the profitable services. Indeed, any such move would require both profitable and unprofitable services to be franchised together. That point was echoed by the Office of Fair Trading.

Although I do not want to get into the issue of creating a monopoly in transport, I will say that, whatever we do, we must ensure that any future transport development offers value for

money, efficiency, and a service that maximises potential for rural and urban dwellers. Importantly, it must be modern and fit for purpose. The final arbiter on that, of course, will be the public. They expect the Government not only to scrutinise decisions but to ensure that public money is spent in the most cost-effective way, as well as ensuring that a quality product is delivered. That is why competitive tendering for the Belfast rapid transport project must be a priority. That is not only my point of view, which is shared by the Consumer Council, the Office of Fair Trading and the CTA, but the view of countless individuals who responded to the consultation.

I, too, question why the Minister for Regional Development went against the advice of his officials, his Department and key stakeholders and ask how he intends to be public owner, policymaker and part regulator. I find that stance somewhat perplexing, and I am sure that the public will find it equally confusing and, indeed, conflictual.

I share the view of my colleague, the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, and wholeheartedly back what he said here today.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I also associate myself with the sentiments of the Chair, the Deputy Chair and, indeed, others about the report being leaked and the subsequent press reports. That caused quite a bit of consternation among employees, who are very stressed about other aspects of their job at the moment. Indeed, we met the employees and the unions to discuss the issue. The unions told us that Translink's senior management have not met them in three years, so perhaps they would like to look into this.

From the outset, the report operated within the constraints of the Transport Act 2011, as my colleague Declan McAleer mentioned. That was supported at the time by most parties here and was in line with the implementation of EU regulation 1370/2007 on competition. The purpose of the inquiry was to address long-standing concerns about transport structures here. As the Chair said, the Committee visited systems abroad, across the water and in the rest of the country. We saw multifaceted efficiencies across the board, at every level, as well as measures that we would like to see here. We also had a number of concerns regarding the governance of Translink and the NITHCo and their relationship with the Department.

All of us, whether urban- or rural-based — those from rural constituencies would obviously say that they are even more disadvantaged — can see the shortcomings in the delivery of a comprehensive transport infrastructure. In our constituencies, those shortcomings are often glaringly obvious. My constituency, which is a small but highly populated rural area that you would know, a Cheann Comhairle, is 15 miles from the main hospital at Altnagelvin, and to access Altnagelvin, you are required to take a bus to the village of Claudy, a second bus into Derry city and then another bus out to Altnagelvin. So to get to an appointment, you are required to make six separate bus journeys. At the Causeway Hospital, a bus drives past the front gate, so you must either take a taxi or have some other way of getting to the hospital.

Some villages served by school bus services are maybe only a couple of miles apart and have a round trip of 10 miles, while other villages served by a different route might have a round trip of some 30 miles. That can be seen across the board, whether in health, education or public transport delivery. There is no consistency. There has been little or no discussion with other transport providers such as the community transport sector or community interest companies such as Belfast Taxis to deliver the public transport requirement, even though they are very keen to take up the slack.

A pilot scheme was rolled out in the Dungannon area. It opened on 30 September after much delay and with little in the way of consultation. Thus far, it seems that the scheme is little more than a rejigging of the school runs in the Translink timetable, but we will have to wait and see.

There has also been no buy-in from the Health Department and minimal contact with community transport organisations. What we do not want to see is a dog-in-a-manger attitude to the delivery of transport in the community.

Recommendation 17 calls for the introduction of short-term contracts to allow for the development of transport bundles based on local plans, which is a very prudent approach.

I thank the Committee staff, the Chair, the Deputy Chair and all those who worked on the delivery of the report and the recommendations.

Mr Byrne: I joined the Committee recently, so I came to the inquiry at a late stage, but I have to say that I largely support the report's recommendations and welcome the fact that the report opens up a debate about the

efficiency and effectiveness of the public transport system here.

It is fair to say that the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, with the three subsidiary companies of Northern Ireland Railways, Citybus and Ulsterbus, has a very tangled web of governance. It is a cumbersome structure, and it is difficult to comprehend the workings and interrelationships of this transport system. That is what the report is largely attempting to deal with.

1.00 pm

As my colleague Mr Dallat said earlier, £200 million a year is going in as a subvention for public transport, so the Assembly has a legitimate interest in how that money is managed, invested and used to improve the service. A lot of capital moneys and revenue moneys are provided by government on an ongoing basis. We all want a quality public transport service. We want it to be effective and efficient, and we want it to be able to meet the objectives of most MLAs, who want to retain a public transport system. Rural transport, however, has to be improved. Many rural people feel that they do not have a good bus service. It is an equality issue for them, and we need a more integrated system, including linking into, and integrating with, the community transport network that has largely been developed by the voluntary and community sector over the past 20 years in Northern Ireland.

We have had 40 years of what I would call a reliable bus service. We have to be thankful for men such as Mr Werner Heubeck, a strong-minded CEO who, despite the Troubles and the attacks on the buses, kept the trains and buses operating to provide a service that has largely been reliable and effective. Over the past 10 years, greater improvements have been made to infrastructure for railways, and we have had new trains and buses. The Goldliner service between provincial towns and the cities of Belfast and Derry is very reliable and very efficient for the users.

As I said, the report is timely and relevant. The agency model is a suggestion to streamline the management structure and functions relating to the public transport system in Northern Ireland. It would be more streamlined and responsive in terms of investment decisions and may be able to borrow money on the capital markets. The agency would perhaps free up the cumbersome structure that has bedevilled some of the innovation now required. I largely support the

motion and the report and I am glad that the debate is now opening up.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Thank you very much for the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Regional Development's report on transport delivery structures. I have been very interested in, and have listened attentively to, the contributions made by all Members, and I hope that, in this response, we will deal with many, if not all, of the points raised. I, too, pay tribute to all the staff and workers involved in public transport over generations and assure them that their work is valued.

Regrettably, as the Chairman said, the report was subject to comment before it reached the Assembly for debate, and headlines of "Privatisation of Translink" have created a considerable degree of unease, uncertainty and confusion, not only for staff but for the general public. I have listened carefully to the debate, and I have to say that the confusion has not been caused entirely by media comment. Unfortunately, the report itself has brought some confusion.

Let me set the scene for public transport provision in Northern Ireland. Journeys have been growing at an unprecedented rate. There were 66.9 million bus journeys last year, which is up 300,000 on the previous year. There were 11.5 million rail journeys, which is an increase of 800,000. This year, rail journeys have continued to grow by a further 15%. Bus journeys are up again too, and I expect journeys to increase again by well over one million to take us beyond 80 million, which is a figure that many said we would never reach.

Independent reviews of punctuality, reliability and customer performance show that Translink is ticking the boxes. Importantly, fares for passengers compare incredibly favourably with the rest of the UK. Rail fares in Northern Ireland have not increased in real terms since 2005. Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, fares have increased by between 15% and 23%. Bus fares in Northern Ireland have fallen in real terms since 2005. In Great Britain, they have increased by around 10%, and, south of the border in the Republic of Ireland, fares have increased substantially.

As transport Minister, I am proud of that record. I am pleased that we have an increasingly efficient and affordable public transport network that is serving growing numbers of passengers.

The report makes recommendations about internal departmental structures. Let me stress

that at no time, either in this mandate or, indeed, the previous mandate, has there ever been any proposal for an agency that is independent of the Department. The setting up of a small, independent agency to carry out public transport authority functions would, I think, be an unduly expensive approach.

With devolution, Departments have moved to enhanced control by local Ministers, rightly making us more accountable. In turn, I am accountable not only to Executive colleagues but to the Committee for Regional Development. I think that we have built up a very good relationship, and I pay tribute to the Chairman and the other members for their contribution in achieving that.

During the recent consultation on reform, the very clear proposal was for a departmental agency that is answerable directly to the Minister. That is the position that we now have. The proposal combines roads and public transport functions in a single organisation. So, I have to say that there seems to be a misunderstanding both of the original proposals and the current position. Transport NI is our new public transport authority, and I believe that its staff has the significant financial, governance and contract management experience required to operate the reformed system and structure.

The Committee's proposal for a review of future budget allocations on the split between roads and public transport is also already happening with the 'New Approach to Regional Transportation', on which, I understand, the Committee was briefed as recently as October. Developing a connected, integrated and sustainable transport network is my priority in striking the best balance between roads and public transport expenditure.

The one recommendation that is not currently happening, and the most controversial, of course, is competitive tendering and the franchising of the existing network. As members are aware, Translink is required to run a comprehensive network of services, using the profits from the well-used routes to cross-subsidise the less well performing, many of which, as we heard and as I concede, are in rural areas. Such arrangements are absolutely typical of regulated markets and are particularly valuable, given the relatively high proportion of rural routes.

Although profitable routes may be attractive to private providers, the privatisation that the Committee suggested would inevitably result in widespread service cuts, which is something that I am not prepared to support. I think that

some Members are getting confused by the difference between privatisation and what is called franchising out both profitable and unprofitable routes; there seems to be little difference in the suggestion or its implication that that is a form of privatisation. The recommendation further fails to answer the question of transitional costs. The report ignores the fact that there are likely to be significant costs from introducing and managing competitive tendering and contracts.

Even if there were merit in this recommendation, I think that there is an issue of timing. Private operators would want to specify all requirements for a contract period that is greater than five years. At a time when my Department and others are involved in planning better integration of local public transport services, the Committee's report is wholly inconsistent with that approach. The Committee had been interested in and vocally supportive of the pilot work that we are doing in Dungannon/Cookstown. I am sorry that Mr Ó hOisín seems to take quite a cynical view of that, but we want to continue with it and examine its results and analysis.

As things stand, private operators that can identify gaps in the market can apply for a licence to operate a new commercial service. So, Translink is kept on its toes as it is.

The report recommends that Belfast rapid transit (BRT) be included in the competitive tenders. The Committee is well aware that that possibility was investigated and that private sector operators were reluctant to take on the operation of the BRT service. Among other issues raised, they wanted full control of fare rates.

Why does anyone think that private sector operators would be concerned about the Department controlling fare levels? Is it because they would want to have lower fares? I think not. Privatisation elsewhere was followed not only by service cuts but by rampant fare increases. The outline business case for the project recommending the award of the contract for BRT to Translink was approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in August 2012, and the Committee was briefed at the time. In November 2012, I presented a paper to the Executive and received full support across all parties for a Belfast rapid transit system based on the outline business case recommendations. Our public transport system is more comprehensive and integrated than those in many other jurisdictions, a point that is often overlooked.

A review of NITHCo structures was undertaken prior to the introduction of the Transport Act 2011. That review rejected the idea of the transport holding company being responsible for the public transport authority. Translink is currently bound to performance and financial arrangements set out in the management statement and financial memorandum (MSFM). That set of controls is significantly more exacting than those normally applied to a statutory public corporation. The Committee's report asserts, wrongly in my view, a lack of clarity in relationships between the holding company and the Department and its subsidiaries and other commercial concerns. There is real clarity. The corporate planning process, the MSFM and the associated monitoring returns provide huge detail on Translink's financial plans and operational performance.

Let me nail any suggestion that there is somehow a cosy relationship between the Department and the holding company, or, indeed, between the Minister and the holding company. It is, as it should be, a professional relationship that challenges and ensures that all aspects of public transport are properly conducted.

The Committee also recommends that the group chief executive and its chief operating officer cease to be full members of the holding company board. However, acknowledged best practice in the public and private sectors makes clear the importance of boards having an appropriate balance of executives and non-executives. We currently have that balance, and I am not prepared to depart from best practice.

Lastly, the Committee suggests that I need to put legislation in place to allow the Northern Ireland Audit Office full access to the holding company's accounts and those of the three subsidiary companies. That is perhaps the most obvious evidence of a flawed report. The existing powers of the Comptroller and Auditor General allow the Audit Office full access to any and all financial or non-financial information. The Comptroller and Auditor General has powers of access for value-for-money examinations, including those specifically relating to NITHCo's use of resources. He also has power of access to NITHCo relating to the audit of the departmental accounts. Using his existing powers, the Comptroller and Auditor General has carried out value-for-money reviews of grants to the holding company, specifically on the Belfast to Bangor rail project in 2007, and carried out a review of the

governance of the holding company, which was published in November 2012.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: I have to make progress. The NITHCo annual accounts are already audited by a firm of professionally qualified accountants. They provide a regularity opinion on the holding company's accounts, as agreed with the Audit Office.

1.15 pm

I confess that I am disappointed by the thrust and quality of the report from the Committee. I have acknowledged, and continue to acknowledge, the valuable input and support from the Committee in the past on other issues, but there is simply nothing in this report that I can properly take forward. I hope that the Committee will therefore review its conclusions. I have no intention of legislating for powers that already exist or reviewing something that was so recently reviewed. I am certainly not prepared to privatise Translink. My focus is on a programme of improvement over the coming years that will lead to the even better use of public money and the further improvement of services for passengers. On that basis, and because of the wording of the motion, which seeks to approve the report and implement its recommendations, I will oppose the motion. I am, however, happy to liaise with the Committee on all these matters as we move forward.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister and Members for their contributions to the debate. I also take this opportunity to thank the members of the Committee, the witnesses, Hansard, the Committee researcher and the Committee team for their valued contribution in bringing this report to the House today.

The Committee is unanimous in its conclusion that the current Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company/Translink structure is not fit for purpose. The Committee reached that conclusion based on the evidence that was provided by the majority of witnesses who wrote to or came before the Committee. The Department and Translink came and sang their own praises, pointing to their charter statistics that showed them to be whiter than white and the favourite of their customers. I remind Members of the famous Disraeli quote about there being three types of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics. Mark Twain said that facts are stubborn things but that statistics are pliable. Here are the facts: the Northern

Ireland Transport Holding Company structure is approaching 50 years old. It is out of date with modern transport requirements. It is a monopoly that feels that it is without any challenge. Even today, it is reported that it has not responded to a freedom of information request to have a consultation document on the siting of the Londonderry line realised some eight months after the consultation was completed. It heralds the fact that it transports 77 million or 78 million passengers a year, but that target has not changed for over a decade. Is that an example of an organisation being progressive or one that is staid and static?

Since devolution, the Northern Ireland Executive have pumped over £1 billion into Translink in the form of new buses and train rolling stock. However, has Translink or the Department achieved any significant degree of modal shift away from cars to public transport? It has gained in the form of new stock but it has failed to produce. I would have thought that an organisation that is protected by law, is told that it will be gifted with the majority of its business and is not challenged for not producing would welcome the opportunity and the challenge that competition would bring. However, the fact is that it does not, and you have to ask yourself why. It is full of bravado, telling us how wonderful it is. However, as Oscar Wilde once said, there are many things that we would throw away if we were not afraid that others might pick them up. The fact is that it is afraid of competition and challenge. It is afraid that it is not the package that it wants us to believe that it is.

I now turn to some of the comments that were made during the debate. Seán Lynch, the Deputy Chair, said that the focus must be on the customer and that implementation of the report's recommendations would achieve this while updating structures that are over 40 years old. He highlighted the difficulties with governance in Translink and the absence of credibility.

I fully endorse Mr Dallat's comments on the role of Translink staff and the risks that they have taken over many years and continue to face. That is a given, and I think that no group of workers has done more in the face of the many difficult situations that they were in.

Ross Hussey, who has now gone, welcomed the report, but he has done a U-turn. The Minister must have got to him at some stage. He fully endorsed the report. He got the papers from any meetings that he was not at and was asked for any comments. No comments came at any point, so I can only assume that the

gremlins got at him at some stage since the document was printed.

Stewart Dickson said that the independence of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company needed to be addressed. He supported the procurement of appropriate expertise and highlighted the fact that only 14% of the capital budget is allocated to public transport, when the Programme for Government target is 65%. This is a failure of real significance.

Mr Easton raised concerns that the proposed public service contract might not be sufficient to avoid EU infraction proceedings, and he called for the introduction of appropriate legislation to ensure regular access to Translink accounts by the Audit Office. My understanding is that the Audit Office does not have access to all Translink accounts or to its subsidiary companies' accounts, so we propose that it get access to all accounts. Given that the Executive have put some £1 billion into Translink over the past number of years, it should be open to transparent public scrutiny.

Mr Dallat: Will the Chairman give way?

Mr Spratt: I am happy to give way.

Mr Dallat: Was the Chairman astonished that the Minister, when talking about accountability, referred to the Belfast to Bangor line, given that, in fact, the accounts were put in a skip and the people involved had a long weekend in County Wicklow, using public transport?

Mr Spratt: I fully agree with the Member. He has raised that on a number of occasions. I noticed that the Minister sidestepped that particular remark. In fact, he sidestepped allowing you in when he had time left at the end of his speech.

Declan McAleer agreed that there was extensive consultation on the agency model and that this was deemed fundamental to the delivery of transport. He emphasised that his party was opposed to privatisation but that the inquiry did not recommend this.

Mrs Hale pointed out that profitable and non-profitable routes should be grouped to allow for greater efficiencies.

Mr Ó hOisín highlighted the effective and efficient systems witnessed by the Committee when visiting the other areas that I mentioned, and he was critical of the inconsistent routes in rural areas.

Joe Byrne spoke of the cumbersome system in place and the need for more integrated transport systems. He said that the agency model would free up the cumbersome system and allow more initiative.

I must express my disappointment that the Minister and his party cannot support the report, particularly after, as I said, the UUP Committee member fully endorsed its various stages. As I said, he had an opportunity to respond to the draft document. He was not at that particular meeting but he got the document and passed no comment back to the Committee Clerk. That is not a very good way for a Member to do business on a Committee.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: No, I am not giving way.

I strongly refute —

Mr Swann: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am being very careful here, because, quite obviously, the Member who has the Floor has not given the Floor. I hope that the Member does not feel that he should raise a point of order to try to use the Floor. If it is a genuine point of order, I will certainly listen to it, but if it is anything to do with the Chair of the Committee, to me that would certainly not be a point of order. It would be abuse of a point of order, since the Member cannot get in on another issue.

Mr Swann: Mr Speaker, I ask you to review the Hansard report in regard to the Chairman's comments and how he has referred to a member of the Committee.

Mr Speaker: I always review the Hansard report, but I must say to the whole House that this is the cut and thrust of debate more than anything else.

Mr Spratt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will not comment on that, but it is typical, coming from the Member that it has just come from.

The Minister stated that the agency would be expensive, yet he ignored the efficiencies that his Department concluded, in the initial report to the Committee in 2011, would be forthcoming. It said that there would be major efficiencies within the Department, but the Minister failed to spell any of that out today. He stated that the most controversial recommendation, that of opening up to competition, could not be supported. That is very disappointing. He and

his officials seem to have completely misunderstood the bundling of routes. I suggest that the Department needs to do a great deal more investigative work on where that is working and working well. We saw examples of that in Scotland, Arnhem and, indeed, in Dublin. I hope, Minister, that that was reported back to you. Rural transport feeds into the main routes and actually enhances the main networks. Translink, in this case, would be the operator and would actually feed into that. The Department is already paying for those rural transport schemes, so a lot of very effective work could be done.

Effective work could also be done with other Departments, such as Education and Health, which require buses for transport, and in many other areas that the Executive are already pumping substantial sums of money into. There is a very real opportunity for that to happen.

I have already touched on the intervention from Mr Dallat in relation to some of the stuff found by the Audit Office. Again, it is evident that the Department has misunderstood the report. The Committee calls for regulatory examinations. The Minister also referred to privatisation of Translink. Minister, that does not help the situation. What we are talking about is competition, which is not wrong, and which your Department officials have said in the past is not wrong. Competition actually makes many people sharpen their pencils. The Department should actually welcome competition in contracts, and not contracts for 10 years. I think that, in a previous debate in the House, the previous Finance Minister was clearly not happy about 10-year contracts being automatically awarded to Translink, and that is what is being promised.

You mentioned the market being tested for rapid transit. That was only soft testing. Those are not my words. They are the words of your officials who are sitting in the box today, who said that they were only soft tests. In our view, those are not open, competitive and transparent procurement procedures, and that is why the Committee raised those issues.

The Committee is unanimous in the view that the current Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company structure is not fit for the purpose of delivering a modern, integrated public transport service and that a review of its and the Department's structures is fundamental. We are of the view that competition is needed, not privatisation, but competition, and I re-emphasise that. To a degree, what you were doing today was trying to jump on a bandwagon

that is wrongly out there due to the document that was leaked and how the press have presented that document. That is totally wrong. No one mentioned privatisation at any stage. We believe that this will create more demand, more efficiencies and the basis for a significant and sustained model shift within a modern and dynamic transport provision.

1.30 pm

I ask the House to accept the Committee motion and this report.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 84; Noes 14.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Byrne, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCreagh, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Rogers, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lynch and Mr G Robinson

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Beggs, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Dobson and Mrs Overend

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport Delivery Structures; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with the relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations.

1.45 pm

Private Members' Business

International Mental Health Centre

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

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the high prevalence of poor mental health in Northern Ireland; notes that a previous world mental health survey stated that the Province has the world's highest recorded rate of post-traumatic stress disorder and that violence had been a distinctive cause of mental health problems here; acknowledges that trauma is one of the most hidden legacy issues of the Troubles; accepts the need to support and restore good mental health for people with difficulties; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to support the creation of a new international mental health centre for Northern Ireland that would be a world-class facility for all.

It is a pleasure to introduce the debate and commend the motion to the House. I am sure that in the next while, we will hear many statistics in this area, and I have a few myself, but I will start more anecdotally.

There is a man who was already a victim when an episode occurred to him quite recently. An old acquaintance, someone who he had been at primary school with, I believe, and who he knew for 50 years, asked for a quiet word. When they found a quiet space, the acquaintance told the man that 35 years ago, on a particular day, he had been given a gun and instructed to go and kill him. The acquaintance had indeed found the man, but he was standing and talking to people on a busy thoroughfare under a street light. So the acquaintance hid in an alleyway, cursing the man for not wrapping up his conversation and moving on so that he could do his deed. Eventually, worried that the police would catch him red-handed with a gun, the acquaintance went home.

The reason he was imparting all this information to the man 35 years later was, obviously,

because he was feeling guilty and could not sleep at night, racked with guilt as his own mortality weighed heavier upon him. He simply, it seems to me, transferred all that angst to the intended victim, who then had sleepless nights thinking of how often over the past 35 years he had befriended the acquaintance.

I mention this because it gives some illustration of the complexity of what we are dealing with here with the legacy of the Troubles, poor mental health and well-being. It relates to the first statistic that I would like to offer to the House, which comes from research between 2006 and 2012 by the now-defunct Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation (NICTT) in Omagh and the Bamford Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing at the University of Ulster. They determined in their research that people with mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) seek help on average 22 years after first displaying symptoms.

It is appropriate to mention this today because, for the past couple of weeks, we have been commemorating the twentieth anniversary of what happened on the Shankill Road, in Greysteel and the murders in between. So the logic of that research suggests that there are those who may have been traumatised at Greysteel, Shankill and the rest who have yet to come forward to ask for help. So it is not right to assume that, at this stage, everybody who needs help has already come forward.

Other statistics from that NICTT/Bamford research show that 40% of adults have had one or more traumatic experiences linked to the Troubles. A world mental health survey concludes that Northern Ireland has the world's highest 12-month and lifetime PTSD level. A previous study by Kessler et al showed that one third of PTSD sufferers do not recover without access to appropriate therapeutic services. However, only one third of those surveyed who met the criteria for PTSD say that they got what they considered to be helpful or effective treatment.

The latest raw data were presented to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister a fortnight ago by the new Victims and Survivors Service. It is important to say that the representatives presented those data by saying that it was probably the first comprehensive set of data that we have had on who victims are, where they live and what their needs are since 'The Cost of the Troubles Study' (COTTS) was conducted in 1999.

It might be appropriate to refresh our memories on the COTTS, which established not only that there are individual victims and survivors but that we can justifiably claim that there are victim communities. COTTS divided Northern Ireland geographically into three categories by electoral ward: high-, medium- and low-intensity areas based on the number of Troubles-related deaths. It established clear links between those living in high-intensity areas and incidence of PTSD, showing a clear correlation between them.

The Victims and Survivors Service, in conducting an individual needs review between 1 April last year and the end of June this year, said that of those who completed a general anxiety disorder test, which is a standardised measure of anxiety, over half — 53% — scored in the highest category, which is severe anxiety. Furthermore, some 94% reported identifiable signs of trauma, although I stress that that conclusion is not a robust indicator of PTSD.

Every postcode is covered by these data. Postcodes showing the highest demand include BT5, which is in the First Minister's East Belfast constituency; BT13, which covers west Belfast; and BT14 and BT15, which cover north Belfast. It is pervasive.

Before moving away from Troubles-related mental health issues, I want to acknowledge how often republicans have made the point to me that there is an uneven playing field in seeking and acquiring diagnosis. They argue that former members of the security forces have direct access to certain areas where experts will give an immediate PTSD diagnosis, whereas others must go to their GPs, who are not necessarily qualified to make the diagnosis, and start a referral process, which means that it can take months to get access to the help that is required.

I acknowledge, in the context of an international mental health initiative, that the support groups serving former police and army personnel that I have spoken to have no difficulty with a new mental health initiative that is for all who have been impacted by the Troubles.

Of course, poor mental health is not specifically related to our Troubles. In the past 10 days, the media have reported on an initiative from the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister, Michelle O'Neill, who is dedicating funding to suicide prevention work in rural areas. The BBC has covered a World Health Organization report that characterises youth unemployment across the United Kingdom as:

"a public health time bomb waiting to explode".

We all know about the issues of self-harm, including completed suicide, among the young people of Northern Ireland.

'The Sunday Times' has been investigating the suicides of army personnel who were stationed at Ballykinlar Barracks in County Down. It has reported a three-fold increase in suicides among serving soldiers in the past three years and a doubling in the number of cases of post-traumatic stress disorder in the past six years. It is, quite simply, all around us: all ages, all classes, all religions and all political affiliations.

I acknowledge the fine work undertaken by my colleague Michael McGimpsey in this area during his time as Health Minister. It was on his watch, beginning in 2007, that Northern Ireland saw significant increases in funding for mental health and the delivery of the Bamford report. I also recognise that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety spends hundreds of millions of pounds on tackling poor mental health and well-being. I also acknowledge the current Health Minister's previous statements in which he affirmed the pervasive nature of this problem. Edwin Poots has said of mental ill health:

"It will affect most of us at some point in our lives either through ourselves, family, friends or work. That is why it is so important that we address this issue."

In another statement as Minister, he pointed out that one in four of us will experience some form of mental ill health at some point in our life. He said that more needs to be done to tackle the issue.

My proposal is a declaration of intent. It is a practical legacy project for the Troubles. It is also a serious attempt to give meaning to priority 2 of the Programme for Government, which includes the commitment to improving health and well-being.

We should back this. If we are having a centre, I understand that, wherever it is located, it can be no more than a hub. It is simply not right to ask people to travel. We must get the expertise on to the ground locally. I am reminded of a man who survived three assassination attempts in Fermanagh. He used to come up to the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) at Maryfield. His driver was his daughter, who said that, when they left the PRRT, he was in great form, but, by the time that they got to Augher and Clogher, she could

see that the good of the day was unravelling. By the time that they got back to Fermanagh, he was no better than he was when they had left eight hours earlier.

Since making the call a fortnight ago, I have been overwhelmed by the support for the initiative in principle, if we can work out the details. Let us, please, discuss this now on its own merits.

In 'Great Expectations', Charles Dickens wrote:

"That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me. But it is the same with any life. Imagine one selected day struck out of it, and think how different its course would have been. Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day."

Mr Speaker, victims were subjected to thorns and to iron. This could be a memorable day, by committing to a centre that would create a chain of gold and of flowers. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Speaker: Question Time commences at 2:00 pm, so I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will, of course, continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Gordon Dunne.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Narrow Water Bridge

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liomsa fiafraí den LeasChéad-Aire an bhfuil sé féin tiomanta go pearsanta don droichead ag Chaol Uisce?.

1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they are personally committed to the bridge at Narrow Water. (AQT 281/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): The short answer to that is yes. I am absolutely committed to the construction of the new bridge at Narrow Water. I do so on the basis of the tremendously successful contribution that a very small bridge in my city has made to the life of that city. Something like £17 million was spent on it, and it has had a massive impact on the city. It effectively represents a new, iconic image for the city. Likewise, the construction of a bridge at Narrow Water would have a similar effect for the people of north Louth and south Down. It would add immensely to the tourism potential in that area.

All of us in the House understand the difficulties around the tendering process and the scale of the tender, which was way in excess of what was expected. Since that, there have been a number of discussions about whether a remedy could be put in place. Caitríona Ruane and I were involved in discussions in Rostrevor with the Taoiseach, and I have been involved in other discussions with very senior advisers to the Taoiseach. I know that, in the background, there is a sense of some remedy for the difficulties that exist.

It is absolutely important, in the context of the next very short while, that we establish whether enough funding can be put in place to ensure that the bridge is constructed. The next important step in the process that I would like to see is a commitment from the Government in Dublin, in conjunction with other aspects flowing from the councils on both sides of the divide, on whether the scheme will go ahead. I certainly

would like to see it go ahead, and I am very much committed to it.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Bhí mé féin i nDoire le déanaí agus aontaím leis an méid a dúirt sé faoi Dhroichead na Síochána ansin.

I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Indeed, I was in Derry recently and I walked over the Peace Bridge to Ebrington to see the Turner Prize exhibition. I must say that I was more impressed by the bridge than I was by some of the works in the Turner exhibition.

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

Mr D Bradley: That being said, will the deputy First Minister recommend to the Minister of Finance and Personnel that he should provide the funding that would fill the existing gap in the Narrow Water project?

Mr M McGuinness: First, I, too, have visited the Turner Prize exhibition and I was very impressed. I know that something in the region of over 1,000 people have visited it each day. There is tremendous interest in it, and I would encourage everybody to go to the city to see the Turner Prize exhibition for the first time ever outside England.

In the context of the second part of Mr Bradley's commentary, I think it would be wrong to identify our Finance Minister as the problem with regard to Narrow Water. There is, effectively, a responsibility on the Irish Government, ourselves, the Special EU Programmes Body and the councils on both sides of Narrow Water to come up with a solution. I do not know whether that solution can be found. I would like to hear the Irish Government say more about it. In my discussions with the Taoiseach in Rostrevor a number of weeks ago, it was indicated to me that he intended to say something about it but, thus far, there has been silence.

I hope that, in the next short while, we will hear whether a solution can be found to the problems presented by a tender that was wildly beyond all our expectations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member who was to ask question 2 has withdrawn his name.

Desertcreat

3. **Mr I McCrea** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress that has been made on the community safety college at Desertcreat. (AQT 283/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: As a colleague of mine in the constituency, the Member knows that I am very keen for the project to be brought to fruition. Of course, there have also been difficulties with the project, which are in the same realm as the discussions that we have just had over the Narrow Water bridge tender. I know that refinements and amendments have been made, and I have a very full and clear expectation that the community safety college in Cookstown will go ahead. I fully and absolutely support that.

Mr I McCrea: The deputy First Minister will know that the local economy needs this important college. Will he give details of when an announcement will be made about the proposed start date? Will he also give an assurance that the work will be done as quickly as possible to ensure that there is no further delay?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely agree with the Member about the contribution that the construction of such a community safety college will make to the citizens of Cookstown, no doubt bringing much economic benefit to the area. The discussions that have taken place thus far have progressed the project. I believe that we are very close to seeing the project commence. I also believe that we can have reasonable expectations that the problems that have afflicted the project over the past number of months will be resolved and that work will begin as soon as possible, hopefully around the beginning of next year.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member who was to ask question 4 has also withdrawn his name.

The Disappeared

5. **Mrs Hale** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the deputy First Minister's republican background and the fact that he will be well aware of those whose loved ones are known as the disappeared, what particular help he can offer to enable and ensure that those bodies are returned for family burial. (AQT 285/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: My full sympathy and compassion are with all those families. They

are far and away the most important people in the discussion. I believe that what happened to those families was totally and absolutely wrong. I believe it was cruel; I believe it was unjustified; and, of course, the IRA was responsible. Over a number of years, other Sinn Féin leaders and republican leaders and I have been involved in exhorting anyone with any scrap of information about the location of the bodies to bring it forward. That has brought considerable success for some families but, sadly, not for others. I again reiterate my appeal to anyone in the community who was involved in any way in any of those situations to bring that information forward. They should bring it forward to the commission, to anybody in a responsible position in society and to republican leaders, who are, I think, very anxious to see the situation resolved.

My full compassion and support are with the families. It has been a terrible ordeal; it has been a despicable ordeal. There is a huge responsibility on everybody, including me as a republican leader, to appeal to anybody who can assist the families out of the nightmare that they face daily.

Mrs Hale: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Given that answer, how can he explain the conflicting reports emanating from the republican movement about why the murders were committed and by whom?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that that is another matter altogether, on which, undoubtedly, people will have their own opinion. The families, at this stage, who I have listened to appear to be more concerned to have the recovery of their loved ones. That is where the big focus is at this time. There is a huge responsibility on all of us to support those families and to support them towards the resolution that they seek, which is the return of their loved ones. As I said, there has been considerable success, but there are families who are still suffering. In the interviews that they have given, including some in the past couple of hours, their big focus is on the recovery of the bodies as opposed to anything else.

Disclosure of Information

6. **Mr Storey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the question from my colleague Brenda Hale and given all the public concern that has been expressed over the past weeks and months about the disappeared and the activities of the president of his party, what action the deputy First

Minister has taken to ensure that all relevant information is made available to the courts and the Police Service of Northern Ireland and that any scrap of information that is referred to in relation to the allegations about Gerry Adams and in regard to the terrible death of Jean McConville and the other disappeared is brought to the courts. (AQT 286/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The issue around the terrible circumstances of child abuse has been well articulated and well aired in recent times. Gerry Adams has made public his position in relation to the role that he played, given that it was first reported to the social services and the RUC in 1987. There is a huge responsibility on everybody in society, without exception, that whatever information they have in regard to situations of child abuse has to be brought forward to the proper authorities. Over many years, many organisations have learned a lot from the quite scandalous cases that have been thrown up over the past 10 to 15 years and have put in place procedures to ensure that — I hope that this applies to all political parties; it certainly applies to my party — anybody who has possession of any information whatsoever in relation to the abuse of children has a duty and a responsibility to bring that forward to the Police Service.

Similarly, in relation to the issue of the bodies that have not been returned to loved ones, I wholeheartedly and earnestly appeal to anybody with any scrap of information whatsoever, if they are out there, to listen very carefully, not so much to what I have to say about it but to the families, who have very eloquently and very passionately argued the case for information to be brought forward. People are out there with that information, and they have a duty to bring that information forward to alleviate the nightmare that those families are going through.

Mr Storey: Does the deputy First Minister, following on from his logic when he called for the cardinal to resign, given the allegations in relation to child abuse in the Roman Catholic Church, now believe that it is time for his party president to resign and to ensure that there is transparency, openness and consistency in the approach to what is a heinous and evil crime — the abuse of children?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that we are questioning the deputy First Minister in his role as deputy First Minister. I put it over to you, if you wish to respond.

Mr M McGuinness: I am prepared to answer the question.

I do not believe that there is any similarity whatsoever between the cases of the cardinal and Gerry Adams. In the case of the cardinal, a child was sworn to secrecy; in Gerry Adams's case, Gerry Adams was fully in support of his niece, travelled to Buncrana, confronted his brother and supported his niece and her mother when she reported the abuse to the social services and the RUC. The other thing that is missed is that you can clearly see that sometimes, in situations such as this, people like to take political advantage without recognising, for example, the trauma that Gerry Adams's family went through as a result of the abuse that was inflicted on them by their father and the many ways in which that entire family are victims, including Gerry Adams. People need to understand that, and they need to place themselves in that situation where, quite clearly, something was happening in that family that was terribly, terribly wrong. The two situations — that of the cardinal and that of Gerry Adams — are not the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of topical questions to the deputy First Minister. We now move to questions for oral answer.

2.15 pm

Executive Office: Brussels

1. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the successes of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. (AQO 4880/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Recent successes of the Executive's Brussels office, in partnership with relevant Departments, include helping to secure from the EU €150 million for a fourth Peace programme; avoiding EU infraction proceedings in relation to Strangford lough; ensuring regulations provide the potential to fund our regional roads infrastructure; and securing timely state aid decisions that safeguard jobs and investments. In addition, since the move to new premises in 2010, some 6,288 visitors have attended meetings, events, briefings and cultural activities in our offices. We believe that such success is delivered only through the local efforts of our office in Brussels, which helps us navigate the complexity of the EU institutions. It is a resource for government and civil society alike. The office is our eyes and ears in Brussels and supports all Ministers in their European engagements.

Success is about getting our way in Europe with decisions that favour us by our making the right arguments at the right time to the right people. The office uses the Barroso task force to get priority access to influence commissioners and senior officials in Brussels. This has not only enabled a full understanding of our situation but triggered quick decisions on state aid when needed by our businesses. The task force also gives us leverage to get commissioners and commission officials over here, and the Commission has recently chosen Belfast as the host site for the international Smart Specialisation conference.

The Brussels office projects a positive image of our region by featuring our achievements in the policy arena and in culture and arts. The office also provides an excellent business environment in which to work. Reputation is a key to successful influence in Brussels and the EU, and I think that our standing there is very good. We are now firmly on the Brussels map. I think that we punch above our weight, and I consider that to be a huge success.

Mr Dunne: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. How do we encourage local businesses to link with the bureau in order to get maximum funding from Europe to support such businesses? I recognise that it is an excellent facility, having visited it last year with the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee. It is well worthwhile.

Mr M McGuinness: Since the visit that the First Minister and I were involved in where we met Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, we have been able to apprise businesses here in the North and, indeed, our own Departments about the importance of ensuring that they are consistently engaging with the European scene. I suppose that, in the past, Europe frightened a lot of people off because of the complexity of the institutions there, but I think that we are breaking that down. Increasingly, we see our businesses collectively going to Brussels, and we see Commissioners coming here. For example, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn came here and addressed the business community in a way that, I think, simplified the procedure and demystified the approach to Brussels. We have to keep that going, and we in government have a key role to play, as have our Departments. They are all now very much engaged in ensuring that we draw down the best that we can for our area.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Will the deputy First Minister give us an update on the development on the Peace V programme?

Mr M McGuinness: The multiannual financial framework for 2014-2020 allocated €150 million to the Peace IV programme. The British Government's economic pact has allocated a further €50 million to the programme from the overall European territorial cooperation budget. Officials are working with the Special EU Programmes Body on the preparation of a draft operational programme based on research and initial public consultation. Policy areas currently under consideration include young people, shared space and services and civic leadership. It is important that that aligns with the new good relations strategy, Together: Building a United Community. The additional €50 million is linked to an Executive commitment to utilise it, where appropriate, in support of the strategy's United Youth programme. Prior to finalisation, the draft operational programme will be subject to full public consultation. Final approval by the Executive, the Irish Government and the European Commission will, of course, be required.

Mr McKinney: The deputy First Minister may be aware that an official recently advised the OFMDFM Committee on the Executive's ambition for funding drawn down through Horizon 2020. Given that Dublin's drawdown from the previous R&D fund — FP7 — was significantly and commensurately more than Northern Ireland's, does he agree that our ambition is weak, low and needs to be challenged?

Mr M McGuinness: Our Barroso task force desk officers and the Invest NI European Union research and development executive based in the office of the Executive in Brussels are part of the recently established Horizon 2020 contact point network. The first meeting of the contact point network was held in Brussels in June 2013 and was attended by representatives from the European Commission Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. The contact point network provides practical support to potential Horizon 2020 applicants from the North. That includes assisting with the facilitation of visits to Brussels, supporting project applications, establishing links with other international partners and, more generally, helping to create a closer relationship with key Directorate-General for Research and Innovation staff in Brussels.

I believe that the Executive office could improve how it operates for the benefit of all of us. The Member raised the issue of Irish Government's drawdown, as opposed to ours. Obviously, that represents a huge challenge for us, which I think all our Departments are up for. There

have been a number of discussions in the Executive about how people should become more proactively involved with Europe, recognising the opportunities that can be presented, not least by Horizon 2020.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that question 10 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Economic Pact

2. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress on the economic pact. (AQO 4881/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Executive and the Government continue to make progress towards the commitments made in the economic pact. We have delivered a successful G8-branded investment conference, with Tourism Ireland developing a considerable PR campaign to build on the G8 legacy.

Securing the right policy levers, particularly the devolution of corporation tax powers, remains a priority for the Executive. We continue to advance the case for the devolution of corporation tax powers within the time frame set out in the pact. We have confirmed that we will continue to benefit from 100% assisted area status until at least 2017. We are undertaking analysis to help inform any decision on the establishment of enterprise zones, and officials have had discussions about establishing enterprise zones, including engagement with England, Scotland and Wales.

The joint ministerial task force is examining whether tailored support is required for local banks and how support for local businesses can be maximised to improve access to finance. An access to finance implementation panel has been established, as recommended in the economic advisory group's review of access to finance for business here. The first meeting was held on 3 October 2013, and work is under way to address barriers to access for tourists such as visa recognition and processing, building on the success of the visa waiver system.

The Executive have agreed the asset management strategy, which includes recommendations to improve processes and deliver significant projects that will unlock value through more efficient and effective management of assets. We have also made good progress with the Better Regulation Executive to progress a review of business red tape in the local economy.

Mr Cree: I thank the deputy First Minister for his full reply. Minister, you referred to the fact that the economic pact outlined a new way forward on enterprise zones. The zones would allow Northern Ireland businesses in designated areas to benefit from enhanced capital allowances. Will the Minister outline the nature of such a scheme and explain what work is being taken forward at this time?

Mr M McGuinness: The Government's economic pact set out proposals on the potential establishment of enterprise zones here. The majority of initiatives available in enterprise zones in Great Britain are, with the exception of enhanced capital allowances, already devolved policy areas, and the Executive have taken steps to support businesses using those levers. Enhanced capital allowances are a potential new lever but would be of benefit to larger capital-intensive projects only. We are exploring that aspect as well as others to see how we can move the project forward.

Mr Lyttle: Does the deputy First Minister have any concerns that delays in finding suitable sites for shared housing and shared education could jeopardise the £100 million additional borrowing powers that the economic pact allocated for that purpose?

Mr M McGuinness: No, I am quite satisfied that the work of the respective Ministers on that issue in the context of Building a United Community is moving forward satisfactorily, with a full ability to ensure that the funding that will be made available can be spent. People will know that huge progress has been made, even in recent weeks, with the Lisanelly project, and I know that the Minister of Education and the Minister for Social Development understand the importance of ensuring that their Departments are in a position to provide the necessary projects that can ensure the success of the Together: Building a United Community process. A lot of work is being done, and people are exercised to ensure that we take best advantage of shared housing and shared education. In the next number of weeks and months, all will become much clearer, and, when that happens, Members will be very satisfied that both Ministers who have a responsibility for shared housing and education have come up with the projects that we think we need.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire chomh maith. The deputy First Minister referred to corporation tax.

What is the agreed projected figure of the cost of corporation tax to the local economy?

Mr M McGuinness: It is important to say that we remain fully committed to taking responsibility for corporation tax as the single measure with the greatest potential to stimulate growth in the local economy. We wrote to the Secretary of State on 24 September to emphasise the need to work towards taking a decision immediately after the Scottish referendum. We believe that the legislative process could not be completed in this parliamentary session if a decision is left until the 2014 autumn statement, and that has implications for the work programme. It is critical that relevant Executive Ministers and our officials are fully involved in the ongoing work by Treasury and HMRC on design issues, given that we will have responsibility for the tax. Our letter highlighted the importance of our officials being briefed on progress and agreeing a process and timetable to reach agreement on the outstanding issues. Many figures have been thrown around over the past couple of years on costs, and all of us clearly understand that, in the final analysis, when we get the Scottish referendum out of the way and hopefully get a positive decision from David Cameron, we are into a renegotiation on the cost. At this stage, in my answer to the Member, it would be a mistake on my part to outline a figure that could conceivably change as time moves on.

2.30 pm

Urban Village Regeneration

3. **Mr Spratt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the urban village regeneration projects. (AQO 4882/11-15)

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

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): As set out in the Together: Building a United Community strategy, four urban village regeneration projects will be created in targeted areas of deprivation. Our aim is that each urban village will be designated as a development zone and a local board created. The board will be tasked with coordinating and overseeing the planning and design of the urban village. It will be given powers to enable large-scale urban village development in a

coordinated manner, with a strong focus on the needs of the local community.

A design group has been set up to progress the high-level development of the urban village programme. It will produce indicative costs for the proposal. We are currently considering where best to situate the urban villages to achieve maximum benefit from the proposal, and we intend to make a further announcement on the detail of those in due course.

In making the final decision on which areas should be chosen as urban villages, we will take into account a range of factors including community relations issues, antisocial behaviour, deprivation, limited commercial heart and services within that community and the community appetite and the infrastructure for improvement in that area.

Mr Spratt: I fully urge the Department to consider the Sandy Row and Donegall Pass areas for potential inclusion. Will the Minister confirm that the schemes will be taken forward through a cross-departmental and cross-agency approach?

Ms J McCann: As I said, the potential sites for urban villages have been examined. There is no definitive answer that I can give you today on where those urban villages will be, but we are very keen to make sure that there is regeneration, particularly in areas of deprivation. We will obviously consult local communities around that. You will also be aware that a lot of community plans are already in place for different areas. So, that is what we will look at, but we will certainly look to engage with all stakeholders in this exercise.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the junior Minister. As she said, the projects are to tackle deprivation and dereliction, as is the social investment fund. The junior Minister says that we will have a board to advise on urban villages: how will that board interact with the zonal advisory panel that was set up to distribute the £80 million of social investment fund money? Will there not be an inevitable tension between the two? How will she manage it?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware that the best way to deliver anything in local communities is in a strategic fashion, which means tying all the area plans together. You mentioned the social investment fund. There are seven design groups in the Together: Building a United Community strategy, and they have been doing a lot of work. They have already been networking with local communities

and the boards that you talked about that have been set up for the social investment fund. So, it is about working together and not about having something up here and something around there. That is the way that we are going forward with this, and those conversations have already taken place.

Mr Dallat: I welcome the junior Minister's response, and I find urban regeneration programmes fascinating. However, will the Minister tell us what will happen after the new trees, paving stones and all that have been put in to ensure that there is a neutral environment where real regeneration can take place and people feel confident to shop in towns and villages where they feel inhibited now because of flags and kerbstones, irrespective of the colour of the flag or the kerbstones?

Ms J McCann: The whole background when we brought forward Together: Building a United Community was about creating that shared space, particularly where the urban villages are concerned. This will come from the community up, as opposed to from up to down, if you like. That is part of the consultation, and we will be tied in with all those other groups and organisations that have already done a lot of work in some areas on these issues, particularly local councils in going forward with community planning.

None of those strategies can sit outside each other or in isolation; they all have to be tied in. So, we will look at the advice of the people who we see as the experts in that field. They are the people who live and work in those communities and who have the plans already there. We will consult with them, and it will be about creating a shared and neutral environment so that everyone can feel safe and be comfortable when they are in it.

Play and Leisure Strategy

4. **Mr Hazzard** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their play and leisure strategy. (AQO 4883/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, junior Minister McCann will answer the question.

Ms J McCann: The Executive's play and leisure policy statement, which was published in 2009, has been delivered through the play and leisure implementation plan, which runs until 2016. Delivery against the plan is progressing well to further support the implementation plan

and build on its achievements. On 8 October, we announced our agreement to invest up to £1.6 million over three years to enhance opportunities for play and leisure here. That will be provided as a signature programme through the Delivering Social Change framework.

As local communities are best placed to identify their own needs, working closely with and supporting them will be a critical part of this programme's success. The play and leisure signature programme is intended to deliver three key outcomes: promoting play to ensure that everyone is aware of its value and benefit; greater local access to space for play; and making planning and support for play central to all our councils' thinking and work. Our Department is working with other Departments to finalise arrangements for the delivery of the signature programme, and we expect to announce details shortly. That demonstrates how we remain committed to supporting the Executive's commitment in the policy statement to deliver on children and young people's play and leisure needs and their right to engage in those activities.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for her detailed response. The news of the investment is certainly welcome. I am not sure whether this will be possible, but will the Minister outline a timeline for the delivery of this project?

Ms J McCann: Obviously, as I said, communities will be critical in the delivery of the programme. That is why we are very keen to ensure that the community and voluntary sector will be able to avail itself of the funding of those initiatives right away. I really think that working in partnership with other Departments, such as the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the Department of Health, is necessary. However, we also need to work with councils, because quite a lot of work has already been done, particularly in those councils that have already set up the play partnerships. Once that is achieved, we would like to see the money hitting the ground as soon as possible.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for her response. Has any research been carried out to assess whether the implementation of parking charges across the region has made it more difficult for parents and children to access local play parks, for example?

Ms J McCann: We have looked at funding, particularly in the councils, in the context of mapping out what is available. Certainly, that would be a part of the process of mapping out parking availability. You are 100% right. We are very keen that there is access to play, because it is a key area in a child's development, and it carries on right into their adulthood, if you like. I think that it is very important that we map out the existence of amenities that are already there and that we look at providing access to them. So, the funding, and particularly the funding that we are directing towards the councils, will come in on planning and everything around it.

Teachers: Signature Project

5. **Mr Storey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the signature project to appoint 230 additional graduate teachers. (AQO 4884/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer that question. She is getting a hard time today.

Ms J McCann: Work on the implementation of the six Delivering Social Change signature programmes, which the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced on 10 October 2012, is progressing well.

The Department of Education is leading on the signature programme to improve literacy and numeracy levels in primary and post-primary schools. The programme will see approximately an additional 233 recently graduated teachers not currently in work being recruited to deliver tuition to children in a total of 267 primary and post-primary schools to assist them in achieving higher grades. It is proposed that 82 of the posts will be filled in primary schools, with the remaining 151 posts being based in post-primary schools. Recruitment began in June this year. As of 25 October, 188 of the posts have been filled. Of those, 67 are in primary schools and 121 in post-primary schools. The posts will run for two academic years, ending in August 2015.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for her reply. Concerns have been raised about the 70 posts that have not been filled and over the fact that we have now progressed into the second term of schools being back for business. As such, will she give an undertaking that the schools that have missed out on the having the programme available to them for the full time, given that it is due to end in August 2015, will

be given an extension so that its benefits can be ensured and there can be tangible outcomes for the pupils for whom it was originally intended?

Ms J McCann: I assure the Member that we are keen to get the programmes and teachers into the schools as quickly as possible. Given the figures that I have just quoted, I can say that the Education Minister has done very well.

A number of other signature projects that are the responsibility of the Health Department and others have not done just as well as the educational one, so we are very keen to make sure that the family support hubs and the social economy hubs that other Ministers have responsibility for are brought forward. We will monitor those and try our best to get them achieved.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she tell us whether any additional measures are being proposed to improve literacy and numeracy?

Ms J McCann: We hope that signature programmes from Delivering Social Change are not seen in isolation, as we hope that other Departments will take forward programmes as well. I am pleased to say that, in June this year, the Education Minister agreed to fund an expansion of the Delivering Social Change project to support literacy and numeracy with a further injection of over £2 million from his Department. That will support another 21 newly qualified teachers in 33 schools. That is a welcome investment, as it represents supporting literacy and numeracy. However, it also demonstrates — this is very important — that we do not want to be seeing the Delivering Social Change signature projects in isolation. We want Ministers and other Departments to come forward with their proposals. Those will tie in with the overall objective of Delivering Social Change, which is to change the quality of life of people in our communities.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers. Will targets and timelines be put in place? Will it be a zero game to make sure that everybody is literate and numerate at the end of the period?

Ms J McCann: It is very important that we do. A lot of research has been done into the gap between children who achieve at school and children who do not. It is proven time and again that, if you are from a poorer family, you have

half the chance of children from more affluent families. I think that the figure is 34%, compared with 68%. International experience has shown us that resources need to be directed at children who are disadvantaged and from poorer backgrounds. Not only does that enhance the achievement levels of the children from poorer families but it raises the bar for all children. So we are very keen to see that happening. That is why we are targeting the need to where it needs to go. I know that the Education Minister has done this; he has looked at it in terms of targeting those resources where they need to go.

2.45 pm

Regional Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, we start with topical questions, and I call Dominic Bradley.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. That is twice in the one day that I have been called first. I think that I will do the lottery.

Car Parking: Newry

1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the parking situation in the city of Newry. (AQT 291/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I am grateful to the Member for his topical question. I assure him that I am very much aware of the issues in relation to car parking across Northern Ireland and, of course, in Newry city. I know that he recently held a meeting in the Arts Centre with traders and local representatives. As a result of that, a request has been made to meet me to discuss the issue.

The Member will know that the parking arrangements in Newry have been greatly enhanced recently by the new car park facility at North Street and, indeed, the car park in the vicinity of the Catherine Street area. The Member also knows of the Department for Social Development (DSD) scheme, which is currently under way and which will, in fact, reduce the number of available car parking spaces. That scheme is the responsibility of DSD, in conjunction with the local council. *[Interruption.]* I can compete with many things, but I am afraid that I cannot compete with a mobile phone. Would somebody ask to put salt and vinegar on their chips, please?

Back to the issue of car parking in Newry: I am happy to meet the Member and local representatives. My door, as always, is open.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members to turn their mobile phones off.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister respond positively to a suggestion put forward by local traders that an hour's free parking should be available to shoppers in Newry?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for the point that he raises. I have made the suggestion, and my door remains open to the prospect, that local councils can help to offset car parking charges for particular periods of time, say the run-up to Christmas. Indeed, Newtownabbey Borough Council has successfully negotiated with my officials an arrangement for Ballyclare. Therefore, that facility is available for local councils to assist the local economy in the run-up to specified periods such as Christmas. If that is a solution that is helpful in the Newry context, I am happy to explore it.

Giro d'Italia

2. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department will be in a position to take the lead on the Giro d'Italia legacy, given the Minister's commitment to cycling, the announcement of a new cycling unit and the recent excitement, in which I shared, about the Giro d'Italia coming to Northern Ireland. (AQT 292/11-15)

A Member: Will we see you in Lycra?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her enthusiastic response to the Giro d'Italia, which I am particularly enthusiastic about. In advance of the final decision being made by the racing authorities to bring it to Northern Ireland, I had an opportunity, along with Minister Foster, to impress the need for such a prestige event to take place in Northern Ireland. Of course, with the advent of my new cycling unit, I strongly believe that we have the potential to lead on that initiative. Members were discussing among themselves whether I was ready for racing in pink Lycra. I can tell you that I am, and that I have my jersey ready.

On a serious point, I think that the Giro d'Italia will afford cycling the opportunity for worldwide promotion as well as showing off some of our great tourist sites and infrastructure, not least in

and around Belfast, along the Antrim coast and in my constituency of Newry and Armagh. I very much hope that Members and the Executive will take the opportunity. If it means that active promotion is better done by my Department as a result of the new cycling unit that I have formed, that is the way forward.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for that response. If the Regional Development Minister were given the leading role in building that Giro d'Italia legacy, what would his priorities be?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary. I think that we are embarking on a cycling revolution, and I hope that everyone will embrace it with the same enthusiasm as I have and see it as an opportunity. I was recently involved in discussions with Transport for London on the delivery of its cycle hire scheme — the Boris bikes, as they are called — and the legacy approach that it took to hosting after the success of the Tour de France.

Perhaps it is the case that many people do not realise the potential impact of the Giro d'Italia, not only on cycling but on tourism and in creating a feel-good factor. I think that it is on the scale of the World Police and Fire Games and the Irish Open, and it has the potential to be even bigger than either. I therefore want a cycling legacy to be carried forward after the Giro d'Italia.

Roads: North-west

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Regional Development what importance he attaches to upgrading the strategic roads infrastructure on the north coast and in the north-west in general. (AQT 293/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Of course, the Member will know of the very good recent announcement that the A26 stretch of road to Glarryford has been given approval by the Finance Minister. I am very pleased that that is the case. I made very strong representations around the Executive table and, indeed, to the Finance Minister himself. I know that success has many fathers, and the number of people who have claimed credit for the A26 is astonishing.

I am reminded of the legendary story about Conrad Hilton and Zsa Zsa Gabor, who were married for a while, but the marriage failed. Zsa Zsa was asked on the steps of the court why the marriage had failed, and she simply said

that she and her husband had only one thing in common: his money. I perhaps have more things in common with the Finance Minister, but I am glad that he accepted my arguments on the A26. It will enhance and improve the strategic road network there, not least for tourism facilities. I think that everyone broadly welcomes the fact that the A26 will be a reality.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his response and the positive outcome of the A26 announcement. Does he agree with me that the more that we can do as an Assembly and Executive, and he as roads Minister, to improve the continuity of the A26 as far as the Causeway Hospital, as well as the impending A6 scheme between Dungiven and Drumahoe, the more we will be able to set at ease those who have concerns that money is not being spent on the north coast and in the north-west?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for the point that he raises. Clearly, as transport Minister, I am a very strong believer in improving the strategic road network and improving and enhancing the connectivity all over Northern Ireland. That is why I am pleased that, as part of the October monitoring exercise, some money has been set aside to bring forward the A6 scheme. I know that other Members are enthusiastic about that scheme, as, indeed, am I. Generally, the economics make pure sense. It simply means that, if you improve connectivity with all parts of Northern Ireland, you create greater job prospects and the ability to move people and goods in the easiest possible manner. That is in addition to the jobs that improved connectivity undoubtedly creates in the road construction industry.

Unadopted Roads

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Regional Development, following the Committee's report on unadopted roads, which contained the recommendation that the Department should work with NILGA on a prioritisation audit, for a progress report and to state whether he has met with representatives from NILGA. (AQT 294/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for raising that issue. He will know that there is a substantial issue around legacy projects in unfinished developments with roads that need to be adopted. I have had discussions with various interested bodies. I know that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) is interested in the issue. Indeed, I have discussed it with NILGA and hope to carry forward those discussions.

I have to say that there is a price tag, a very high price tag, on possible upgrading. Were the Department asked to do it, we simply could not afford to do it. I doubt whether the Executive could afford to do it either. It is working in partnership with those who are directly involved in the issues that can, hopefully, lead to an improvement. I understand the frustration and problems that many householders face when living in estates with unfinished road and water infrastructure. It is important that we try to make progress on this. However, it is not one for an easy solution.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. He has clearly outlined that it is a difficult situation. Many people are complaining about developments not being finished. When does he propose to meet NILGA? When does he propose to bring forward a solution, working with partners as he has indicated, to try to resolve those problems?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I assure him that I am, and will be, directly engaged in working with everyone who has a contribution to make to try to bring about a solution to this issue. I know that it is raised with Members on all sides of the House in their correspondence and in dealing with constituency matters, as, indeed, it is raised with me regularly through my work in the Newry and Armagh constituency.

Tourism: Strangford/Portaferry

5. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Regional Development to update the House on what he is doing to resolve the access and security issues that have arisen alongside the recent tourism benefits being experienced in Strangford and Portaferry due to the arrival of cruise ships. (AQT 295/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his interest in the matter and the helpful attitude that he has adopted to it. He will know that, at my request, officials from the Whitehall Department for Transport met my officials at Strangford to examine my proposal to use the existing pontoon fenced-off area as a temporary restricted area. It was agreed that, with prescribed management procedures, the existing fenced-off area would suffice as a restricted area. On that point, I am hopeful that we will be able to secure agreement with the owners of the pontoon. If agreement cannot be obtained, I have established a fallback position

of a temporary fence mechanism that would facilitate individual cruise ship visits.

It is important, as the Member underlined, for me to ensure that that important area continues to benefit from cruise ship passenger traffic without that providing any adverse visual impact to one of Northern Ireland's most scenic areas.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answer, which is a positive contrast to some of the media reporting. Does he agree that it was regrettable that the public debate got ahead of the facts?

Mr Kennedy: I very much agree that it was very unfortunate that a particular spin on the story was put out before we could find the accurate explanation. However, I am satisfied to say that that gave me the opportunity to bring forward, I think, a very good and positive solution. I am pleased that we secured agreement on a mechanism of compliance without visual impact. Like him, I am committed to Strangford. I am committed to cruise ship access to the area and, as he will also know, I am committed to the local ferry services, which, as the Member is aware and I am pleased to say, we are en route to replacing.

3.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of topical questions. We now move to questions for oral answer. Question 1 has been transferred to the Department of Finance and Personnel for a written response, and question 3 has been withdrawn.

NI Water: Chief Executive

2. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister for Regional Development why, after a thorough HR process, the Department did not appoint a chief executive of NI Water. (AQO 4896/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The board of Northern Ireland Water (NIW) is responsible for the employment of a suitable chief executive and appointed Penna plc as an executive search company to support it in the recruitment process.

Following an extensive assessment exercise, four of six shortlisted candidates were interviewed for the post, and two candidates withdrew prior to interview. The interview panel considered that no candidate met the full competencies required for the post, and no appointment was made.

My Department and NI Water are liaising on the way forward for the appointment of a new chief executive. The NIW board has appointed an interim chief executive pending completion of the recruitment process.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister clarify if any questions have been grouped?

Mr Kennedy: Yes.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline how much the failed process has cost the public purse? When will the new chief executive be in post?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. I can confirm that costs to date are in the region of £70,000. Obviously, strenuous efforts will be made by the board of Northern Ireland Water, in conjunction and consultation with the Department, regarding how quickly we can move forward to resolve the situation.

Mr Hussey: Does the Minister agree that it is better to wait for a candidate of the right standard than appoint a top applicant who falls short of the required standard?

Mr Kennedy: I agree absolutely. It is always important to secure the best candidate for any position, particularly that of the chief executive of Northern Ireland Water. The principle of merit should always be the abiding principle.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that, given the performance of some previous chief executives of Northern Ireland Water, there must have been someone in that pile who was up to it? Does he agree with other Members that £70,000 is money that Northern Ireland Water can ill afford to squander on a process that delivered nothing?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. In my tenure as Minister for Regional Development, I was nothing but impressed by the performance of Trevor Haslett, who retired recently as chief executive officer. It may well be that the Member is referring to a different time period, but I was certainly very satisfied by the leadership, confidence and dedication of Trevor Haslett as he brought NI Water forward after a very difficult period.

It is important that we get the right person. I can tell the Member that a total of 84 candidates expressed interest in the position,

but after careful consideration, the panel concluded that it was not satisfied to make an appointment. I of course regret the potential cost, but, ultimately, everyone is agreed that, when the appointment is made, it has to be the right appointment.

Comber Greenway

4. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department would consider extending the Comber greenway to link with Comber town centre. (AQO 4898/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department co-funded and facilitated the construction of a new cycle bridge across Ballyrainey Road in partnership with Sustrans and Down Rural Area Partnership. The works were completed in March 2012. Regrettably, by virtue of the provision of the new bridge, associated earth works and embankments meant that it was not possible to retain the existing accesses.

Over recent months, officials have investigated the possibility of providing an alternative access point onto the greenway cycle route in the vicinity of Ballyrainey Road junction. A number of options are being explored. However, alternative walkway access options that have been considered to date are proving financially prohibitive; they are estimated to cost £160,000. Land implications are also proving difficult because there is a need to purchase additional lands that are not under public ownership. Unfortunately, my Department has no funding source available to pursue the matter further at this time.

Miss M McIlveen: I appreciate the Minister's response. He has answered what was going to be my supplementary question. Is he considering extending the Comber greenway to link it with Comber town centre?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. Obviously, there is a strong desire to establish that link at some point. It is not proving easy, financially or pragmatically, to do that at present. However, we will continue to work with the local group and the various interests to see whether we can identify a means of moving forward.

Mr McCarthy: I must express some disappointment at the Minister's response in relation to access at Ballyrainey Road. There was access at Ballyrainey Road prior to the bridge being built, and that was convenient to a car park —

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

Mr McCarthy: Will he continue with his efforts to ensure access at that very important junction?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It seems that he is criticising me for carrying out the work to get the bridge in place. Now that the work is done, there are pragmatic problems. Some of those problems are outside the direct control of the Department. However, we will continue to explore avenues by which we can, hopefully, resolve the issues. I am simply highlighting the fact that it is not within my immediate gift to create those accesses because there are land ownership issues and financial restrictions.

Mrs Overend: We have talked already today about the Regional Development Minister's commitment to cycling. Can the Minister detail the rationale behind his £2 million bid for cycling funding in the recent October monitoring round?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her supplementary question and her interest in all these matters. My Department applied for £2 million in the October monitoring round to supplement funding to provide infrastructure in and around schools that are participating in the active school travel programme. Unfortunately, the bid was not successful. However, a very limited funding package was made available by way of the local transport safety measures, which may support infrastructure close to schools that are participating in the active school travel programme.

A1: Hillsborough

5. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the volume of traffic using the A1 flyover into Hillsborough, County Down. (AQO 4899/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following completion of the flyover-type junction at Dromore Road in Hillsborough, traffic surveys were carried out to establish the level of usage. Those surveys, which were undertaken between 17 and 23 October 2012, indicated that the two-way traffic on the new flyover is 5,681 vehicles a day.

Officials are aware that, during the morning peak period, some northbound traffic chooses to leave the A1 at the junction, travel through the centre of Hillsborough village and rejoin the A1 to the north of the village at the roundabout.

That is considered to be partly as a result of traffic delays experienced at the Hillsborough roundabout.

As the Member is aware, I have met her and concerned representatives, and I understand the nature of the situation. However, it is difficult to find a practical solution to the difficulties. Officials from my Department's Roads Service have looked at a number of options to improve the traffic capacity of the Hillsborough roundabout to reduce delays and discourage strategic or through traffic from diverting off the A1 and travelling through the village.

Officials believe that the situation could be significantly improved in the short term by the installation of traffic signals at the roundabout to minimise delays during the morning peak. A scheme to provide part-time traffic signal control has been designed. It has not, however, been progressed, as initial informal consultation indicated that there was limited support for the scheme among the various parties. Officials remain of the view that a scheme to provide part-time signals on the Hillsborough roundabout would be of benefit and help towards reducing traffic going through the village during the morning peak.

Officials planned to convene a meeting with local representatives to determine whether a way forward could be found. However, that has not progressed as quickly as I hoped, and I have asked officials to contact you directly within the next two weeks to arrange a suitable date and time to meet.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Given that the flyover at the A1 has increased the traffic into Hillsborough by 124%, would you agree that an impact assessment to include noise pollution should be carried out in Hillsborough village, as it is a major thoroughfare for events at Hillsborough Castle and the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society at the Maze? Furthermore, will the Minister clarify what long-term traffic management plan he has in place other than traffic lights for Hillsborough village?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. Longer-term plans to try to ease or resolve the situation would include the grade separation of the junction as part of the M1/A1 Sprucefield bypass proposals. It is intended that those proposals will also consider congestion at the roundabout junction on the A1 at Hillsborough.

Roads Service has commissioned consultants to consider a range of options and to evaluate all the viable options for capacity enhancement along the route. We will continue to do that and to consult with local groups and representatives as we move forward.

TEN-T Regulations

6. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Regional Development why, prior to a negotiated amendment, Northern Ireland would have been forced to spend £1.46 billion on the rail network and £13 billion on the roads network under the European TEN-T regulations. (AQO 4900/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) regulation articulates the European Commission's vision for the creation of a seamless Europe-wide transport infrastructure that must be in place by 2050. That vision brings many requirements, and those applying to the core network must be in place by 2030. In delivering this vision, the European Commission estimated that the cost of implementing the first financing phase for the core network for the 2014-2020 period to be in the region of £212 billion.

As first presented, the TEN-T regulation imposed many requirements in the shape of new technical standards, infrastructure enhancements and unrealistic deadlines on the United Kingdom as a member state, and thus on Northern Ireland as a region. I have taken a robust approach with the European institutions to ensure that the regional circumstances of Northern Ireland have been understood and taken into account. I have worked closely with Westminster to present a strong and united member state position. I have secured the support of our Members of the European Parliament and met key contacts in Europe, including Siim Kallas, the vice-president of the European Commission, and Brian Simpson, the chair of the European Parliament's transport committee.

The reality of our actions is that, without successfully securing exemptions, including the isolated network status for our rail, we would have been forced to refocus investment in our transport network away from planned and appropriate improvement to reach the required standards, despite there being no economically viable case for us to do so. My interventions have made sure that the tremendous progress that we have made in growing public transport passenger numbers is not placed in jeopardy.

Mr B McCrea: If I understand the Minister correctly, he is arguing that he has successfully reduced the amount of investment required and that that is a good thing. Does he believe that Northern Ireland has adequate levels of investment in its transport network to remain competitive? Would he care to comment on the recent Confederation of British Industry (CBI) report that highlighted concerns among the business community at the lack of a pipeline of infrastructure projects?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, although he appears to have misunderstood the thrust of even his own question and certainly the extent of my answer. *[Laughter.]* The point that I made is that, as a result of the work that I brought forward in Europe and the representations that I made to senior European figures in the Commission, Parliament and other places, it was no longer necessary for Northern Ireland to spend vast sums on improvements that we feel were unnecessary.

It was better to spend it on upgrading and on providing new and better services. That is why I take satisfaction from the work that we have carried out: that we are not having to spend more money on improving things and can move on, and build on, the progress we have made.

3.15 pm

I was interested in the CBI report, and I agree very much that spending money on key infrastructure projects is key to regenerating the economy here. As transport Minister, I see that as my role at the Executive table, and I want to carry forward those projects for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. Has the Minister had any success in having the Trans-European Transport Network extended beyond the eastern seaboard and into the west?

Mr Kennedy: As a member of the Regional Development Committee, which we have had good assistance from when it comes to making representations, the Member will know that rather than dealing with the core network, the comprehensive network, which involves upgrading schemes to the benefit of all parts of Northern Ireland, is going to be the key feature moving forward. The issue is to attract European assistance and investment for that. I am not precious about where the schemes take place, as long as they do take place and upgrade the overall network infrastructure of

Northern Ireland. My record as Minister proves that.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has said and thank him for his lobbying in Europe for TEN-T funding. What are the chances that Northern Ireland will obtain TEN-T funding for roads rather than rail?

Mr Kennedy: Again, we have helped to inform Europe of the nature of our road and rail networks. For example, no freight moves on our railways, and our rail gauges are different sizes, so we can never have high-speed railway connections between Belfast and Dublin because the cost would be prohibitive.

We need assistance to improve infrastructure, such as the link between Belfast and Dublin. That particular service could do with an investment of moneys, as could the various road schemes that will improve connectivity throughout Northern Ireland.

Wind Turbines

7. **Mr Wilson** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions he has had with NI Water regarding the location of wind turbines on sites under its control. (AQO 4901/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have had no discussions with NI Water regarding the location of wind turbines on sites under its control. The Department has been engaging with NI Water and other stakeholders on future investment priorities for the water sector. That includes exploring the options for renewable energy to help manage costs and meet the Executive's Programme for Government and strategic energy framework commitments. I plan to consult shortly on draft social and environmental guidance, setting out all our priorities.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Regional Development Committee has been told by NI Water that it intends to look at erecting 350-foot-high turbines in the Silent Valley area. Will the Minister give an assurance that he will actively discourage a development of that nature, which would destroy the landscape in the area, hurt the tourist industry and, of course, damage his own constituents?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and for the opportunity to set the record straight on this matter, because I believe that there has been some unhelpful and misguided comment on it. I

confirm that Northern Ireland Water has no such current proposals. I confirm also that I have no proposals or plans for wind farms in the Mourne. NI Water has advised that it does not foresee the development of wind farms in the Mourne. Of course, the Member will know that any such proposals would need to go through a business case and regulatory and planning approval processes. I am very happy to place on record that I have no intention of putting forward such proposals for an area of outstanding natural beauty in the Mourne, and I do not believe that NI Water has either.

Mr Eastwood: The Minister told us about the Mourne, so will he expand a bit more on some other areas and tell us what efforts Northern Ireland Water is going to make to try to provide renewable energy in an attempt to provide lower bills for many overstretched customers?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. Of course, the Member will know that the Executive's strategic energy framework includes a target to generate 40% of our electricity from renewable sources by 2020. The Programme for Government includes a commitment to continue working towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by at least 35% on 1990 levels by 2025. The Member will also know that renewable energy and emissions targets fall under the remit of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and of his party colleague the Minister of the Environment.

Ballymoney Railway Station

8. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister for Regional Development what further action can be taken to assist passengers with a disability who are experiencing difficulties in using the new bridge at Ballymoney railway station. (AQO 4902/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In November last year, I officially opened the new walking and cycling railway bridge in Ballymoney. I am aware of a recent case that was brought to the Member's attention, and I am naturally sympathetic to people who are in that situation. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the new footbridge was taken forward in partnership with Ballymoney Borough Council and Sustrans and was designed in compliance with Disability Discrimination Act regulations.

Safety of the public is paramount. That is why the bridge replaced the unmanned level crossing. It provides safe access to and from the town and gives greater opportunity for

people of the community to walk and cycle to work or school as part of their daily routine. Prior to this, passengers had to cross the tracks to access both platforms via a temporary footbridge or a barrow path at track level.

I am happy to meet with any member of the public who is experiencing difficulties using the new bridge to discuss how we can assist them in making their journey more easily.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. I place on record the appreciation of the constituents who have contacted me about the way in which Translink has at least accommodated initial meetings, although it is unfortunate that the outcome is still the same. The issue remains that there are people with disabilities who cannot access in a practical way the new bridge, which is, I believe, something of worth and value to the station. We have a situation whereby Translink, thankfully, removed a possible prosecution of a disabled person for crossing the line —

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

Mr Storey: — because they could not access the new bridge. I appreciate that the Minister has agreed to meet, but will he give an assurance that an alternative can be put in place to facilitate that small number of my constituents who are set at a disadvantage because of the current arrangement?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I have genuine sympathy for the case that was brought forward. I am glad that Translink officials adopted a very sensible and sensitive approach in the handling of this case.

I suppose that it comes down to the fact that it is about reducing the dangers involved with having to cross the tracks, which was the historical way that people went across that route. It is also about improving the safety conditions that are involved. As I said, I am happy to meet the Member and any constituent about the matter.

The new bridge complies with disability legislation and is an impressive structure. The Member will accept that Ballymoney station is the better for it. We will continue to look at the issues raised, but it is difficult, because safety has to be the paramount concern.

Mr Swann: What is being done to assist people with visual impairments to use public transport in general?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am happy to confirm that last year, in conjunction with Guide Dogs and Translink, my Department completed the evaluation of a pilot project involving the provision of audiovisual information systems on a Metro bus service and at a number of designated bus stops. I am pleased to report that the evaluation highlighted the benefits of audiovisual systems for all passengers but particularly for people with visual impairments and older people. Indeed, the vast majority of respondents stated that audiovisual announcements made journeys easier.

The Department and Translink continue to explore potential funding for the provision of audiovisual systems on the bus network, including any additional solutions that could be provided through advances in technology, particularly through the use of smartphones. It is disappointing that the bid that was submitted for 2014-15 to enable my Department to begin implementing audiovisual systems has not been met. However, my Department is also in discussions with the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) about options for a travel aid for visually or hearing-impaired people or for people with communication difficulties that will allow them to seek help from transport staff.

Mr Allister: Are there any plans to deal with overcrowding, which evidences itself at peak times on this route the closer that it gets to Belfast?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It is some way removed from disabled facilities at Ballymoney station, but it is an important question nonetheless. Of course, the Member has been ingenious as usual.

One of the products of rail's success has been the increased numbers of passengers. I was waxing lyrical in the earlier debate about the increased numbers of people that are using trains, which are at record levels since 1967. That presents us with the question of whether we can transport all those people safely and comfortably. I am interested in bringing that issue forward with Translink to ensure that the maximum level of comfort for the passengers who want to use our trains in increasing numbers can be afforded to them. I will note the Member's concerns about that line.

A5: Public Consultations

9. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Regional Development on which dates public

consultations will commence on an appropriate EU habitats directive assessment and an addendum to the environmental statement on the A5. (AQO 4903/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: During my predecessor's time, a decision was taken not to carry out full appropriate assessments on the potential impacts on the various designated sites arising out of the A5 western transport corridor (WTC) project. We are now dealing with the consequences of that decision. Four reports are currently being developed to inform habitats regulations assessments of the potential impacts on the various designated sites arising out of the A5 WTC project. It is proposed that the consultation on those reports will commence in spring 2014.

Following the declaration of reduced budget requirements in 2013-14 and 2014-15, my Department has received funding to progress the A31 Magherafelt bypass and the A26 Frosses Road dual carriageway. To comply with the judgement, my Department needs to proceed carefully. Therefore, the issues and timing associated with updating the environmental statement are still being considered and developed, and it is not possible to finalise a programme at this time.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister outline when he expects the project to commence?

3.30 pm

Mr Kennedy: As I said, bearing in mind the judgement that was handed down on those issues, it would be wrong for me to speculate on the timescales. I have simply outlined to you that we are developing the four reports into the habitat directive assessments. I am also aware of other impacts that need to be assessed. It is very important that we give due care and timely consideration to all those things and work our way systematically through a process that complies with the judgement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends Question Time. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments while we change the top Table.

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

Private Members' Business

International Mental Health Centre

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the high prevalence of poor mental health in Northern Ireland; notes that a previous world mental health survey stated that the Province has the world's highest recorded rate of post-traumatic stress disorder and that violence had been a distinctive cause of mental health problems here; acknowledges that trauma is one of the most hidden legacy issues of the Troubles; accepts the need to support and restore good mental health for people with difficulties; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to support the creation of a new international mental health centre for Northern Ireland that would be a world-class facility for all. — [Mr Nesbitt.]

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Mental health is an ever-increasing issue and, unfortunately, one in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem. Practically every family in Northern Ireland will be affected by mental health issues, with women more likely to be treated for a mental health problem than men. Self-harm and suicide statistics are also linked in many cases to mental health issues.

The facts that 10% of children have a mental health problem and that depression affects one in five older people highlight the startling fact that mental health issues know no boundaries of age, race, class or gender. It is vital that services are in place to provide care and support to patients, carers and families who are affected by mental illness, and that those services are consistent across all trust areas.

There is no doubt that the Troubles have had an impact on the mental and physical well-being of our population. The legacy of the Troubles lives on. The loss of family members through shootings, bombings and other attacks has left its mark on society. Given our troubled context and the trauma that has been experienced by so many, there will be no quick solution to the challenges that we face.

The main idea of the motion has some merit. Obviously, an initiative that has the potential to improve services for sufferers of mental health

problems has to be considered. However, it is important to note that the idea of a trauma centre is not new. Several years ago, a similar centre was run in Omagh, funded by the Department of Health and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). However, for various reasons, that centre closed its doors.

I know that the Minister has taken an active interest in developing mental health services across Northern Ireland. I also know that he will continue to pursue what is best for the people whom we represent. The Bamford review set out a theme of improving community-based services for mental health. It also set a clear vision for a shift towards community-based treatment. With that vision, it is essential that the right network exists to support patients, with carers and families at the core. Sufferers and their families must have a full range of professionals within accessible reach to get help and support. Given that mental health is a wide-ranging issue with many contributory factors, a joined-up approach involving different agencies and Departments from all levels is essential. However, as with many issues, funding is unfortunately limited and challenges remain to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our mental health services.

I have become very aware of the widespread impact of mental health through the many evidence sessions that the Health Committee has had at our meet-the-consultant workshops, which we attend regularly. Recently, two mothers met us and detailed in a very personal way the struggles that they face in knowing where to get the right help and support to assist family members who have had various drink, drug and mental health problems. Their loved ones need and deserve proper diagnosis, support and treatment.

I commend the work of many local charities that do such an excellent job in difficult circumstances. They include local organisations such as CAUSE, which brings much-needed support and compassion to sufferers, and Action Mental Health, which does so much important work in providing care and help through its New Horizons programme. Northern Ireland has a high prevalence of poor mental health and high levels of post-traumatic stress. We must all continue to work to reduce the burden of mental health across our land.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer of the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

Although we recognise that there are many excellent examples of good practice in the field of mental health, there is much room for improvement. None of us would disagree with the points in the motion. We all accept that there is a high prevalence of poor mental health in the North, and no one can doubt that it is conflict related. However, as the proposer said, the motion is a declaration of intent. Therefore, we need to develop the concept, and we need to be very clear about central issues, such as who the centre will be for, what the outcomes will be, where it will be located and how it will be funded. As we move on in this important debate, we need to put more meat on the bones in developing all those proposals.

It is important to reflect that the statistics speak for themselves. As many as one in four will suffer from mental illness in the North. Recent research shows that treating people at home and in the community now accounts for 55% of the budget, a rise from 40%, with treating people in hospital now accounting for 40%, a reduction from 60%. In the past five years, admissions to hospital under the mental health programme of care (POC) has decreased by 0.7%. However, the number of admissions for day care treatments has increased markedly from 1,494 in 2008 to 3,324 in 2012-13. All of that may reflect the need for a centre of excellence or new facility.

It is worth pointing out the figures for the average overnight beds available across the mental health specialities: the highest figure of 90.7% was reported in the mental illness speciality; the lowest figure was reported in the child and adolescent psychiatric speciality.

The Minister's draft strategic implementation plan for Transforming Your Care in October 2012 referred to the resettlement of all people currently living in mental health hospitals to be completed by March 2015 and a regional reduction in the number of acute mental health inpatient beds over the next three to five years. Therefore, to address the issues of prevention, recognition, early intervention and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder, a multiagency public health approach is, indeed, required. Current research tells us that there are around 150 long-stay patients, and we have allocated £2.8 million in the current spending review for the total cost of resettlement. However, I am sure that we all agree that the total cost will be significantly higher.

In the Twenty-six Counties, £30 billion is spent on mental health, and funding for mental health across the island is still comparatively low.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies and the Institute for Public Health in Ireland, who conducted a feasibility cross-border mental health study, indicated the concept of promoting an all-Ireland mental health strategy in 2007. The University of Ulster stated that post-traumatic stress disorder cost £172 million and that nearly 40% of the population had had conflict-related traumatic experiences.

As we move away from the medical model in dealing with mental health issues, we cannot or should not ignore the specifics of coming out of conflict. It is well documented that this issue needs to be recognised when resourcing and funding the sector is being debated. Equally, issues are now coming to light around the protection of children in care who have mental health difficulties, and I recognise that a statement will be made on that in the next few days. While supporting the principle of the motion, I suggest that we need to develop the debate around location, who the centre is for and its funding and outcomes.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the very important issue of mental health. We have heard that one in four of us can expect to face some form of mental illness in our lifetime, and the motion also recognises the harsh reality that our past has left a heavy burden of mental stress. That is why we should, in fact, think of providing better support services as part and parcel of dealing with the past. To the best of my knowledge, it is a non-contentious part, and I hope that it will remain so. I believe that it can and should become an exemplary part where we meet the urgent needs of our most vulnerable without question or equivocation. It should also be exemplary in consulting those most directly involved.

The SDLP supports the concept of a mental health centre of international standing, but we want to design such a facility alongside those who will avail themselves of its services. A collaborative effort must be sought. This is not a case of "Build it, and they will come"; it is a case of designing it to its best capacity so that it will deliver in a more comprehensive way.

The issue of mental health is so far-reaching in our society that we cannot afford to wait until a new centre is built before we start to seriously tackle the causes and effects of mental illness. We do not have the luxury of time with this issue. That can be seen if we look at our suicide rates, particularly among the young.

Research tells us that the total cost of mental illness in Northern Ireland is estimated at £2.8 billion. That includes cost of care, loss of

output and human cost. That is the cost, but just think that 30% of our GP visits are related to mental health. We must recognise, too, that, given the prevalence of mental ill health, we will need a coordinated action plan to develop comprehensive mental health promotion strategies to reduce the future incidence of mental health problems.

Mental health promotion is key to helping to reduce the incidence of mental ill health. It is also relevant to a wide range of policy initiatives, not just around health but around social inclusion, neighbourhood renewal, community strategies and health at work. It is another example of an area where we can think about greater joined-up government. There is still significant work to be done around removing the taboo surrounding mental illness. We, as elected representatives, must show leadership by ensuring that mental illness is tackled sensitively and that the necessary processes and procedures are put in place to ensure that no discrimination on the grounds of mental health is encountered by sufferers.

The SDLP believes that the recommendations made in the Bamford report must be followed through if mental health services are to improve in Northern Ireland. We must also start to focus quickly and much more comprehensively on the issue of increasing cases of dementia. We must also remember the important role played by the carers of those experiencing mental ill health. Carers are central to the treatment and well-being of people with mental health needs. Any facility would have to incorporate advice and support for those with caring responsibilities for a person with mental ill health. We must ensure that carers have access to interventions that enhance their quality of life and emotional well-being.

Such a centre would be making a point though, and I vouch that it is an important point, much bigger than just dealing with the problem of mental ill health. Surely for it to work as a beacon in an international context, we would have to establish it against a backdrop of saying that never again will we allow our people to endure what so many had to. How can we properly say that we are treating vulnerable people with mental illness and urging them to return to their community to be cared for when that community itself is still torn by division and strife? How could such a centre enjoy any international reputation if, for example, it was operating against the backdrop of what we have had to endure over the past year, with division dominating the headlines?

We have a political priority here as much as a health one, where we put trust, tolerance and participation as targets for our ambition for individuals, communities and government and where we could claim not only that a mental health facility is world-class but that it exists in a society that is itself world-class. It is not that long ago that the Health Minister was reflecting on how, in respect of health spend, mental health services were the poor relation. It will take some determination to go from poor cousin to world-class, but it could and should be done if we are to properly address not just our mental health issues but the causes of them. We support the motion.

3.45 pm

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party welcomes the opportunity to have this debate this afternoon. Although we are somewhat sceptical of the motion and the manner in which it has been formulated, we are content for the issue to be given further consideration.

At the outset, it is important to stress a number of points. First, we need to invest more in mental health services across the board. Mental health and learning disability have always been the Cinderella of the health service. Northern Ireland has a relatively high incidence of mental health conditions. As has been said, over one in four people will experience mental health difficulties at some time in their life. Around 60% of people in Northern Ireland have experienced trauma at some point in their life. As a consequence, Northern Ireland has one of the world's highest rates of the more specific post-traumatic stress disorders. Our conflict and the result of the hideous violence have played a central role in the significant proportion of those suffering from PTSD. Apart from the futility of the violence and its effect on innocent victims, there is an economic cost to the situation in unfulfilled lives and lost productivity to our economy. I note that the Executive will shortly publish a draft strategy on economic inactivity.

Despite this situation, Northern Ireland has historically spent a lower proportion of its overall health budget on mental health services than other parts of the UK. Although it is only right to acknowledge that the situation has begun to improve in recent years with the Bamford review and successive action plans, there is still a long, long way to go. There are questions to be addressed in considering the creation of a dedicated international mental health centre. The motion, it seems, comes in the context of the UUP's misguided and opportunistic campaign against a peace and

reconciliation centre at the Maze. As I understand it, the UUP has put forward this proposal as an alternative to that development. Let me be clear: this should not be framed as a choice; there could and perhaps should be room for both.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: I will wait to the end to see how I get on, Mr Nesbitt.

Without addressing the past and acknowledging not only the hurt and damage caused but the degree to which it influences the tensions and disputes of the present, we risk repeating past mistakes. Addressing our past is, therefore, central to the process of reconciliation. Alliance does not believe that a peace centre at the Maze would have become a shrine to terrorism, and we fear that yet another opportunity to promote reconciliation has been lost. We think of the multipurpose stadium that never was. There should be space for full consideration of a mental health or trauma centre based on its particular merits and need. Similar ideas have been put forward, including by the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors in a response to the consultation on the EU peace and reconciliation programme, Peace IV.

There is a debate to be had about whether it is better to build a dedicated trauma centre or to better mainstream and integrate trauma services throughout existing mental health provision. I understand that there is already a trauma unit in each trust area. It is unclear how much discussion the supporters of the motion have had with the victims sector or mental health professionals and what engagement there has been with the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care board.

'Transforming Your Care' states that the current trend in expenditure is towards the provision of services in a community setting. There are also capital schemes to support mental health services, including one not far from here in the vicinity of the Ulster Hospital. We very much welcome that. If there is to be a new dedicated facility, there needs to be an understanding of precisely who it would be for, whether it would deliver acute services and whether it will be a residential facility. What about physical well-being? Recovery from trauma is also about physical health. There are risks that the use of such a centre could inadvertently introduce labelling and reinforce a stigma —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Could the Member bring his remarks to a halt?

Mr McCarthy: — for some with mental health conditions. What discussions have taken place with professional researchers —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry. Your time is up, I am afraid.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party is content for further debate to occur on the proposals in a wider field. I am sorry, Mr Nesbitt.

Ms Brown: I support the motion, which, for the most part, I suspect few people would disagree with or fail to support. Mental health issues are suffered by many but understood by few. Unlike physical injuries, there are no stitches or plasters, but the scars run deep and the effects last for years. Most people do not mind giving up an hour or two to visit people in hospital, but the long-term effects of years of mental ill health place much more strain not just on the sufferer but on those who love and support them. From that point of view, I support the idea of properly addressing the issue. There are, of course, temptations, perhaps on all sides of the House, to focus on the conflict-related aspect of the motion and to begin, yet again, the never-ending "whataboutery" of who is to blame. However, that merely adds to the pain of the sufferer, and it is perhaps best that we avoid it and instead concentrate on what can be done for those who continue to suffer in silence.

One aspect of looking back that is important is funding and support for mental health. As a region, Northern Ireland has received billions of pounds on the basis of being a post-conflict society, and the observation has been made that much of that funding has gone to communities where much of the suffering continues. What have those people got in return for that funding? Where has the money gone, and how has it been spent, if the difficulties are still so prevalent? It might be time, 15 years into the process, to properly address the needs of sufferers. That is not to ignore the fact that those who played a part in the conflict may be suffering from mental health issues. However, perhaps it is time to take a fresh look at how post-conflict funding can be properly focused and delivered to the benefit of the whole community, not just a chosen few.

Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety and stress disorders, affect one in three people. As with many health issues, men are particularly affected, with mental health issues prevalent among young men aged 18 to 25. It is vital that the stigma attached to mental health is addressed urgently to bring us to a situation

where men and women of whatever age can freely express their feelings and seek help before it is too late. In many households, mental health is the unspoken subject in the room. Poor mental health and stress disorders are still a prevalent feature of our society, and it is only right that we see adequate and highly professional services developed and delivered here. Many such services already exist in the health service, but I am conscious of the demand placed on them.

I know that the Minister wants only the best for the people of Northern Ireland in the available services and support. In fact, he made that very point in May at the Royal College of Psychiatrists conference:

"Investment in community based mental health services, and in specialist services such as CAMHS, eating disorders, personality disorders and psychological therapies, has risen from 40% of the overall mental health budget at the time of Bamford, to 55% today."

I am keen to see further investment in our mental health services and adequate support provided for those in need, particularly in areas affected by years of terrorism. I do not think that it particularly matters where the services are delivered, as the most important thing is to help those in need to rebuild their life.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the motion, but, at this point, I think that the provision of a centre of international excellence is probably aspirational. It would be a good idea for us to apply ourselves to dealing with the increase in the number of people with mental health problems here in the North and then go on to develop a world-class facility.

Mr Nesbitt was light on the detail. What is the international component about? Is it to provide services to people here or services to others? How would it sit with the work that has already gone on among various organisations to address the mental health needs of victims and survivors? We need a lot more detail in that respect.

Over the past five years, the number of admissions to hospitals under the mental health programmes of care decreased by 0.7%. However, admissions for day-case treatment increased from 1,494 in 2008-09 to 3,324 in 2012-13. Statistically, on the basis of comparable studies across the world, we have the highest level of 12-month and lifetime post-traumatic stress syndrome in the adult

population. As many as one in four people here will suffer mental illness. Nearly 40% of the population has experienced conflict-related trauma.

In October 2012, the draft strategic implementation plan for Transforming Your Care referred to completing the resettlement of all people living in mental health hospitals by March 2015. Regionally, there would be a reduction in the number of acute mental health inpatient beds over the next three years to March 2015. Six inpatient acute mental health units for those aged 18 and over are to be developed.

If the issues of prevention, recognition and early intervention and treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder are to be addressed, a multiagency approach is needed. The spend on mental health represents approximately 7% of the health budget; in the Twenty-six Counties, a much larger proportion of the health budget is spent on mental health issues. Funding for mental health services is low and needs to be increased. In 2007, the Centre for Cross Border Studies and the Institute of Public Health conducted a feasibility study of cross-border mental health promotion and recommended the concept.

A couple of months ago, I attended a seminar facilitated by Action Mental Health on mental health issues, and one of the things highlighted was the number of children, some as young as six, who have mental health problems. Many issues are coming to light around protection and guidance for children in care who have mental health difficulties. A number of children and young people in mental health facilities are vulnerable and need protection under the law. There is a lot of concern that the proposed Mental Capacity Bill will exclude the voices of under-16s. It is essential and a matter of urgency that the Bill is brought to the Assembly as soon as possible.

We also have the proposed introduction of benefit cuts under so-called welfare reform. This, should it come to pass, will impact on the most vulnerable and will no doubt increase trauma and stress for many and increase the number of those who will continue to suffer mental health problems. The reality of all this is that we do not deal adequately with mental health issues and treatment here. It is very much the Cinderella of the health service. Of course let us develop centres of excellence, but let us start to deal with and support the problems that need to be dealt with here in the North and put our own house in some semblance of order.

4.00 pm

Mr D McIlveen: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. It is appropriate that we have this debate today. It is almost 10 years since the concept of a one-stop centre for mental illness in Northern Ireland was first discussed. Given the time that has passed, it is maybe helpful that we look at the issues again in a holistic way.

There is no doubt that the premise of the motion is interesting. Day and daily in our constituency offices, all of us who are elected representatives meet people who are struggling with mental health issues. The thought of Northern Ireland becoming a world leader in these services is certainly food for thought, and I do not think that anyone in the House would not aspire for us to reach that level. However, we have to be careful as to how we proceed. We have to make sure that whatever concepts or initiatives we launch are effective. It is easy to make broad statements and give sound bites about certain issues, but, when we are dealing with a very personal issue and a very traumatic time in the life of those who suffer from mental health problems and their families, it is vital that we look for effective solutions and something that will inevitably work and help people who need the help and the support of government. I think that the Department —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: Yes, I will.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, with respect to post-traumatic stress disorder in particular, there are undoubtedly lessons to be learnt and things could be done better? As we suffer the highest level of PTSD in the world, we may well have something to learn for ourselves and something to offer the rest of the world.

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

Mr D McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I agree entirely with the Member, and I thank him for his intervention. Post-traumatic stress disorder is an incredibly horrific illness for anyone to suffer. Given the history of our society in Northern Ireland, we all know the causes for the higher rate of post-traumatic stress that occurs here and the background and reason for it.

The Department should be commended for the work and investment that has already gone into

dealing with particular mental health issues such as PTSD. Although we are playing catch-up to an extent, there is no doubt that the Department's action in addressing the previous funding imbalance between community and hospital services has been crucial. The Minister has committed to implementing the Bamford principles, and Transforming Your Care supports and reflects that approach.

As I said, the concept of an international mental health centre is interesting, but we need to focus on what Bamford recommended. A key recommendation is that there should be evidence-based services to address psychological trauma. "Evidence-based services" means providing a service for which there is evidence that it will work. I remind the Members who tabled the motion that the former Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation in Omagh has already attempted to provide such a service. At that time, the demand to sustain it did not seem to exist. So, before we launch into creating another such centre, we need to be convinced that it is the right thing to do.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he consider the raw data coming from the Victims and Survivors Service to be, at least, a foundation for providing the evidence that, he says, is lacking?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. We have to accept all the data that is out there. A number of studies have been done across the board on the issue. I do not oppose the establishment of another trauma centre; what I say is that we have to be clear that it will work. In that vein, Bamford also recommended that home treatment services are an effective way to deal with these issues. It is established that community services and home treatment are the most effective ways to treat many mental health problems. For that reason, as I have mentioned, the Minister has addressed the funding imbalance, and 56% of the mental health budget is now spent on community-based services.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on mental health and bring the issue and how we address it to the Assembly. However, I caution against the desire to create a central hub for mental health services when the research and evidence points us towards community services as the most effective way of treating the vast majority of mental health problems that we have to face in Northern Ireland.

Mr Copeland: The human mind, no matter how undamaged or damaged by experience and life, is more complex and valuable than the most expensive computer that has ever been built or is ever likely to be built. When it goes wrong, it is very, very hard to fix. Mental illness has been around for a very long time. It was treated differently in the past in some ways, because the availability to treat it was different.

My father, upon being promoted to shipyard foreman, went in on the Sunday before he was due to start his new job on the Monday. A man, whom I will call Sammy, congratulated my dad on his promotion and said, "Mr Copeland, I am the only sane man in Harland and Wolff". My father, intrigued, asked how he could make such a statement. Sammy pulled from his pocket a sheet of paper that was given to him when he had left Purdysburn, as it was then, stating that he was sane. My father, in the twilight of his life, said to me that, if all the 37,000 men who worked in that place at that stage had been lined up, it would have been true that Sammy was probably the only one who could prove that he was sane. He benefited from employment in a society that was different in its nature, hopes and aspirations from that that we currently inhabit, and he made his way in the world.

Today, it is different. How, sir, in the name of God, is it possible for a son or daughter of this city, which is the fourth provincial capital of the seventh wealthiest nation on the face of this earth, living less than a mile from here, having suffered an incident in their childhood and reaching 22 years of age without receiving any help that amounted to anything, find themselves deprived of the £57 a week that the state says that they need to exist or of the value that the state puts on them and being reduced to living in a third-floor flat with no gas, no electricity and no food, making toast with candles?

The system does not cater well for those who suffer mental illness. It leaves them in a cold, dark, lonely place. Some survive; some do not. I am thinking of a son of this city who was buried on Saturday week ago. He was 31 years of age. He worked all his life, but he then lost his job and applied for state support through disability living allowance, which, in my view, he was entitled to. He visited my office to ask whether I could represent him at an appeal. Unfortunately, it was on a day on which the Committee sits in here, so I could not. We agreed that we would get it rejigged. However, he could not wait; he had literally given up. I know that, sometimes, I think that I am the only one who gets cases such as that, but I am not. I know that we all have them. I know the guilt

that we all bear and feel when someone does something that we think that we could have prevented.

The Troubles bear a responsibility for a lot of the current situation, but they are not solely to blame. There is the impact of welfare reform. In my view, Westminster legislation brought over here and converted to a Northern Ireland Executive Bill almost verbatim does not adequately address the differences that exist in the nature, the structure and, most importantly, the history of our society.

Those who suffer mental illness generally do so alone. Many are not capable of earning a living. Many turn to the temptations of life to blind the sorrow, be it drink, drugs or company that does them no good. If that centre can save nine lives, according to a figure that the Minister gave me some time ago, the saving to the state would be £1.5 million for each suicide. That will be money well spent. If we in this place can do something — anything — that alleviates the loneliness that those people suffer, they will have been well served.

Mr McCallister: It is unfortunate that the idea of this being an alternative to the Maze centre and the issue of mental health have been mixed together in the debate. It is unfortunate, because what I have heard from all sides of the House on what we need to do on mental health issues has been very encouraging.

Regarding where the proposal came from, I will quote from the speech that Mr Nesbitt, the proposer of the motion, gave to his party conference:

"What is missing from the Maze debate is an alternative to a peace centre at that most controversial venue."

During that speech, he went on to propose this trauma centre that we are debating today. It is unfortunate that that has become mixed up in this, because, in all the controversies about the Maze centre and whether you are for or against it, the one thing that this debate highlights is that we stand united as an Assembly in thinking that we should do all that we can to address the scourge of mental ill health. It is quite interesting to note how we got to this point and the price that we probably paid for the Maze centre being put on hold or completely scrapped, whatever your viewpoint is on it.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: The dysfunctionality of the Executive is part of the reason that we got to this stage, and there is the cost of that.

I am happy to give way to Mr Nesbitt after I point out that work is very good on mental health. If we have thrown away the opportunity for 3,500 jobs at the Maze centre, that will be a huge regret to us all.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that the Maze, the peace centre and everything that he is talking about are not in the motion? The motion is about mental health on its own merits.

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

Mr McCallister: With the greatest respect to Mr Nesbitt, this is the one idea that he announced in his party conference speech. This is his one big cherry on the cake. It is his flagship policy, yet he has suddenly come around less than three weeks after his party conference to the idea that the two are not related. In proposing the motion, he talked at length about doing more for victims, which all sides of the House will agree with. He suddenly says that the two are not related, and I find it a little strange that he would even suggest such a thing.

I hear from all sides of the House about dealing with mental health. When I was a member of the Assembly's Health Committee, a rough rule of thumb was that the spend on mental health here is about half of what it is in other parts of the country yet our need is twice as much. It does not take much of a genius to work out that that will not deliver the outcomes that you want.

In dealing with various issues around mental health, such as tackling the stigma, how we deliver in the community is important. I am encouraged that Minister Poots and his predecessor, Mr McGimpsey, bought into the Bamford review and pledged to deliver it. In fact, Mr McGimpsey and Mr Poots have directed moneys at how we deliver it. We have a long way to go. We need to do more, and we need to do better. I am not quite sure how many discussions Mr Nesbitt had with Mr McGimpsey about this proposal. Minister Poots said in May of this year:

"Our services are moving to a model of treating more people in their own homes and communities, something very important to service users and their carers."

4.15 pm

It will be interesting to hear whether that is still the policy of the Minister. Is he still committed to the facilities in Craigavon, the Downe, Beechcroft and the various centres that we are setting up? The issue I have with moving away from that model to a central location, as Mr Nesbitt suggests, is how you deliver that. The most obvious example is the so-called centre of excellence for autism at Middletown. It has changed so much over the last 10 years, and whether anyone has got any good out of it has been left up for debate.

What we need are services. We do not actually need more bricks and steel in buildings. We need services in the communities and we need to make sure that people can access them at the appropriate time, speedily and readily. We need to do much more to lift the blight of mental health.

Mr Lyttle: I too welcome the opportunity to support longstanding calls for improved mental health provision in Northern Ireland and to consider the issue of a regional trauma centre to help address complex needs in our community. I find myself agreeing with John McCallister, though, that the proposers of the motion seem to have conflated the issues of mental health under-provision, addressing a legacy of trauma that has been bestowed on our community as a result of years of futile and heinous violence in the community, and the proposal for a centre for peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland. Those are separate issues that we need to address on their own merit.

I do, however, say fair play to Mike Nesbitt for putting this issue on the agenda. As members of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — Mr Nesbitt as Chair and me as Deputy Chair — we have heard serious concerns in recent weeks regarding the services currently provided to victims and survivors in Northern Ireland 40 years after the outbreak of the Troubles here that have traumatised individuals quite intensely across our community. The Victims' Commissioner has proposed a round-table event to which she would invite the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Victims and Survivors Service, the victims' forum, the victims and survivors themselves, obviously, and Members of the Assembly. I hope and believe that every party should support that practical event, which could consider this type of proposal, and, indeed, the services that we are calling for here today, in more detail.

This is not a new issue or a new idea, nor should it be politicised into becoming a zero-sum choice between this proposal and a peace and reconciliation centre. The Victims' Commissioner's response to the call for ideas for the European Union Peace IV programme in Northern Ireland in November 2012 and, indeed, the Cost of the Troubles Study surveys in the 1990s put forward the need to address health and well-being among victims and survivors and to address the psychological impact of the conflict here as the number one need. Victims' Commission research has found that approximately 40% of our adult population — over 500,000 people — have experienced one or more Troubles-related traumatic events.

The Victims' Commission recommended that Peace IV deliver a major project that provides for specialised services to treat chronic mental ill-health, a care pathway to deal with complex mental health issues in conjunction with the Departments of Health in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, family therapy services and, indeed, consideration of a world-renowned regional trauma centre to serve Northern Ireland and the border region. However, as the Chair of the Health Committee said today, we need to take great care in considering that type of proposal. We need to consider it in line with other reviews, such as Bamford, and get into the detail of who exactly we hope it will serve and what format it should take. Should it have a holistic approach in terms of finance, housing, mobility assistance and pain clinics? What should the role of the faith community be? Where should the location and access be and, obviously, how will it be funded? Of course, it must, if brought forward, be based on victims' needs rather than on what others say that they need.

We know and have known that the Troubles left an enduring legacy of mental and physical health need in our community. It is high time that we got on and got serious about urgently meeting this need in a decisive and comprehensive way.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful to the honourable Member for raising this important issue and welcome the contributions made by Members today.

It is widely recognised that Northern Ireland has higher levels of mental ill health than any other region in the UK. It is estimated that around one in four adults in Northern Ireland will suffer from a mental health problem at some stage in their life. I would have preferred it had the motion today, as opposed to calling upon me to

support the creation of a new "international mental health centre" for Northern Ireland that would be a world-class facility for all, called for the development of mental health services that would be a world-class facility for all. I do not think that the creation of a new building will create a world-class service, but I do think that we can, should and must create and develop world-class services. We have many good services in Northern Ireland. That can be done without the development of more buildings or the identification of a single building for mental health services. I will deal with that in a little more detail later.

The impact of the conflict here on the health and well-being of our population has been the subject of much research and debate. Although there is some discrepancy in the conclusions of the studies, most researchers agree that the Troubles have had an effect on the health and well-being of our community. The extent of their impact on our mental health has been debated. A research study in 2011 found that Northern Ireland had the highest occurrence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) of more than 30 countries surveyed worldwide. It found that, in more than a quarter of the PTSD cases examined locally, the conflict here was a contributory factor.

The impact of the Troubles on the mental health of the population was acknowledged by the late David Bamford in his review of mental health services. He recommended that evidence-based services be developed and expanded to address psychological trauma. In accordance with clinical guidelines, the recommended treatment for psychological trauma is primarily through psychological and social interventions: in layman's terms, talking therapies. There is, for example, considerable evidence that the use of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder is beneficial.

I am pleased to say that there has been progress in the development of our psychological therapy services in recent years. In 2010, my Department published a strategy for the development of psychological therapy services, which the Health and Social Care Board and Public Health Agency are implementing. The strategy was underpinned with recurrent funding of £4.4 million, which provides for around 80 staff delivering around 50,000 therapy sessions a year. Today, some £6.5 million is spent on those services. This funding provides a range of services, including psychology, psychotherapy, CBT and trauma therapy, and provides psychological care for those with PTSD.

Recent investment has been focused on the training of existing staff in psychological therapies and the establishment of primary care talking therapy hubs. The aim is to provide support to people at an early stage and in their communities to prevent their problems from escalating. That is in line with Bamford's focus on early intervention and was reinforced in Transforming Your Care. The improvements in mental health services and the recommendations that flowed from the Bamford review have become the map for the reform and modernisation of our modern mental health services. They were supported by the previous Minister, as Mr McCallister said, and are supported by me.

The Bamford vision is that people with a mental illness should be treated in the community, close to their families and friends, unless there is a clinical reason for not doing so. Inpatient care should only be provided for acute cases or where someone needs to be detained for their own safety.

Since embracing the Bamford report in 2008, an additional £40 million has been invested recurrently in mental health services, bringing current expenditure to £240 million a year. At the time of the Bamford review, we were spending 60% of the mental health budget on hospital services and 40% on community services. That balance of expenditure has shifted. Last year, we spent 44% of the mental health budget on hospital services and 56% on community services.

Better community-based services have brought about a reduction in the number of people having to be hospitalised for mental health treatment. The development of crisis response teams, home treatment teams and community mental health teams has meant that earlier intervention has prevented conditions from becoming acute. The development of those teams has also meant that people who need inpatient treatment can be discharged from hospital sooner because they now have access to better support in the community.

Transforming Your Care supports that approach. Some people still need inpatient treatment. For that reason, we are currently replacing old, out-of-date, asylum-type psychiatric hospitals with modern, state-of-the-art, acute facilities associated with our hospitals. For example, we have the Bluestone unit in Craigavon, Grangewood at Gransha and the child-and-adolescent facility at Beechcroft already open. New units are planned for the Ulster Hospital and Belfast City Hospital. It is important that buildings do nothing to further

stigmatise mental health patients. The days of the big, old asylums are over. They are gone, and I would not support any proposal that would support anything akin to that kind of facility.

While our mental health services have come a long way since Bamford, we still have much more to do. Further reform will require further funding. Some of that can be found from efficiency savings. However, new money will also be needed. That is difficult to find in the current economic climate and given the range of pressures across the entire health and social care system.

In addition to statutory mental health services, the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) was established in 2012. The aim of the VSS is to contribute to the health and social care needs of victims and survivors through the provision of individualised courses of treatment and care, and support is provided on the basis of assessed need. The VSS provides support in three areas: health and well-being, social support and individual needs. Of the individual needs conducted to date, 17% of applicants required a more detailed stage 2 psychological assessment, just over 50% are already in contact with mental health services, and 50% have severe depression and/or anxiety. The HSCB is in discussion with the Victims and Survivors Service about how statutory mental health services might be developed for people identified as having complex PTSD needs by the VSS.

Service personnel, veterans and their families also require mental health services. Armed forces personnel returning to the UK from operations have access to outpatient, day-case and inpatient treatment as necessary from the Defence Medical Services' occupational psychiatric service. On their return to Northern Ireland, armed forces families and veterans have access to mental health services within the Health and Social Care system on a similar basis to other members of the Northern Ireland population. The Royal Irish Aftercare Service and a number of voluntary organisations also offer services to address the mental health needs of returning service personnel and veterans, and much of that is dealt with in the Department-led Armed Forces Liaison Forum.

In respect of the new international mental health centre, the proposal put forward for a dedicated centre is not a new one. The Northern Ireland Centre for Trauma and Transformation operated from October 2002, promoting psychological therapy, in particular CBT for the treatment of PTSD. However, after

the previous Minister — a UUP Minister — withdrew the funding in 2010, it ceased to exist.

I am somewhat perplexed by the fact that the proposal before us today is so similar to what was in existence when the Ulster Unionist Party held this portfolio. I am not criticising the previous Minister for making the decision that he made. It appears that the centre did not get the support or the numbers of people coming through that it had anticipated. Despite having on its board of trustees people of some standing, such as Professor Fabian Monds, the Duchess of Abercorn, Professor Roy McClelland, Professor Paul Seawright and Mr David McKittrick, it did not work. Today, three years after the Ulster Unionist Party withdrew funding for such a centre, I am yet to hear the argument that the big idea is to have another centre and establish it somewhere else. I am somewhat confused. Hopefully the case will be made much more convincingly in the winding-up speech than it was in the initial proposition.

4.30 pm

The organisation has seen a decline in the demand for its services. We are sitting with a recent application for Peace IV funding that contains a similar proposal to that set out in today's motion. The NICTT, which is now closed, was to do things like undertake research and promote innovative practice. The proposal before us is for a programme for research and innovation, trauma therapies and training in humanitarian relief. The NICTT was to provide trauma-related training and education programmes and assist with humanitarian relief internationally. Areas of focus in the new proposal are addressing conflict-related trauma, peace-building and building social and economic sustainability. Health, universities, the voluntary sector and international elements are to be involved. Of course, the University of Ulster, through the Magee campus, was also involved previously. I get more and more confused about what was wrong with the previous one and what was so different from what is proposed now. Evidence of that has not been presented to us today.

We know that conflict-related trauma can take many years to manifest itself symptomatically. We also know that there are transgenerational aspects to such trauma in families that deal with these issues on a daily basis. Bamford acknowledged the benefits of psychological therapies such as CBT in the treatment of PTSD. The development of these therapies has been a priority. Appropriate training and supervision in the use of the therapies is

ongoing to ensure that staff are competent to practice.

Our services use evidence-based interventions that are outcome-focused. Research is an intrinsic element of mental health service development. The arrangements for implementing Bamford include research and development as a key strand of that work. It is essential that we use interventions that have been shown to improve the lives of those who receive them. At the same time, we are embedding in our mental health services a recovery ethos whereby people can take control of their own life and live a purposeful life in their community.

Support for people with mental illness is much wider than health; it is a societal issue and, therefore, a government-wide issue. It is about education and training. It is about housing. It is about employment. It is about the day-to-day issues that are important to us all. That is why the Bamford action plan, which my Department published on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive, is a cross-cutting document. Its five key themes are those that are important to people with mental health problems and their carers: promoting good mental health and well-being; supporting people through education, housing etc; supporting carers; better mental health and learning disability services; and better structures and joined-up working between Departments and agencies.

We are still developing our mental health services. Mr McKinney raised the issue of dementia. A joint mental health promotion and suicide prevention strategy is being developed. It will be published for consultation by the summer of 2014. Kieran McCarthy mentioned that the Victims and Survivors Service had submitted a similar proposal for a world-class centre; I have dealt with that. Members also talked about a multiagency approach. We have a strong voluntary sector in mental health. It receives funding of £6.76 million each year. So, that is something that we are practising. We are still developing our mental health services, and much needs to be done.

I recognise that there are those in our communities who will need help and support to deal with the trauma of the past. I can assure Members that service development will be informed by the issues that were raised today. It is important to recognise that we may do many things well but can still fail people, so let us identify how we can do well for everyone who comes to us, and let us ensure that people who suffered the trauma of the Troubles get the quality support that they need.

Mr Beggs: I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. It is very healthy that we are talking about these issues. On reflection, we should all have spent more time trying to bring about improvement before now because, as we learned from Mr Nesbitt, 22 years is the average time that someone suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. When you think of the events that happened 20 or more years ago, there is no doubt that victims have been suffering in silence, along with their families. More people will come forward if we encourage them to do so by ensuring that we have the proper treatment and support to help them to regain their full mental health.

It was interesting to learn that Northern Ireland has the highest preponderance of post-traumatic stress disorder in the world. It is higher even than America, which has suffered huge numbers of casualties in Iraq and Iran, and higher than Lebanon and Israel, where there has been ongoing conflict over very many years. There is a particular problem in our midst that we need to address.

Mr Nesbitt mentioned the postcode areas of BT5, BT13, BT14 and BT15. There was a concentration of pain and suffering in those areas throughout the Troubles. Undoubtedly, that has contributed to ongoing issues of mental ill health and post-traumatic stress disorder. The Bamford report indicated that wars and serious societal conflicts:

"tend to lead to the breakdown of infrastructures, loss of social capital and lead to major risk factors in terms of psychotic morbidity and suicide."

Therefore, it is an issue that was predicted to an extent. It is for us to move forward and address it.

Gordon Dunne highlighted how local charities work to address mental health issues and made particular mention of CAUSE and Action Mental Health. Maeve McLaughlin accepted that post-traumatic stress disorder was a major issue and there could be a need for a specialist centre. She also highlighted the need for a multiagency approach to address mental health needs. If you read the literature and the best advice available, you see that the multiagency approach seems to work best. She also highlighted the importance of working in the community. That was a theme that many Members and, indeed, the Minister commented on.

Fearghal McKinney backed additional support for post-traumatic stress disorder and said that

those who are suffering should be consulted on the design of any new service so that it best meets their needs. He warned that time is of the essence in these matters, particularly as poor mental health can result in fatalities. Kieran McCarthy sounded sceptical about the idea, but he said that he would like the Maze peace proposal as well as a trauma centre. He asked -who such a centre would be for and what purpose it would serve. Those are valid questions. If he had listened to the debate, he would have heard about the number of people who suffered quietly and whose needs have not been addressed. Only about one third of those who meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder to be clinically diagnosed have received support that they found useful. A huge reservoir needs to be addressed, and we as a community ought to work to do so.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Certainly.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Member accept that the debate has drawn out a dispute not about the extent of need but about the best way to respond to that need?

Mr Beggs: The debate has been well balanced. Undoubtedly, there is a need to go in the direction of the Bamford report. That was started under Michael McGimpsey, with the recognition that centralised hospital support was not the best treatment and that care in the community played a vital part in improving mental health. Nevertheless, there is a need for learning and best practice and for a centre where that learning can occur and be passed on. It is not enough to say that we should work in isolation. Clearly, there is something particular to Northern Ireland, and, although there has been a fair amount of research, further support is needed to bring about improvements in our service and meet the needs in the community. David McIlveen seemed to ask why we needed to go in a centralised direction and said that the health service was treating those with post-traumatic stress disorder well. Again, the facts do not back that up.

Interestingly enough, I recently visited a new centre in my constituency called Blossoms. It did not come about because the health service recognised that there was a need or because of Peace funding. Essentially, it involves horticultural therapy, which works well in Scandinavian countries and is recognised as working particularly well with post-traumatic stress disorder. The centre came about in

Northern Ireland because of rural development funding and the foresight of a family at Larne Lough Nurseries, Maureen Harvey and her daughter Liz. It creates a garden environment in which treatment takes place, and it has been successful. We need to pick up on best practice elsewhere and adopt it here.

Michael Copeland, in his usual way, highlighted some of the plights that the most underprivileged in our society have suffered as a result of mental illness and falling foul of welfare reform. John McCallister and Chris Lyttle seemed to question the need for such a centre. There is undoubtedly a need to address the complexity of the issue to find better ways to deal with it.

I go back to the fact that we suffer the highest levels of post-traumatic stress disorder in the world, which involves a large number of people. Reports such as the excellent 'Economic Impact of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Northern Ireland' state that, although the numbers are large, that is not the only issue. In the past 12 months, some 18,000 adults will have been identified as having had post-conflict-related trauma events. The numbers are large, but we must keep our focus on all those individuals and their families. Reports refer to the millions of pounds that mental health issues cost the health service through medication and the millions of pounds that are lost to our economy, but it is also about individual lives and people who continue to suffer. If those people can be identified and given support, an eight- or 10-week course is relatively inexpensive and can dramatically improve the life of many people. It is important that we look at what we do.

4.45 pm

The Minister recognised the need to improve the service, and he questioned the need for a building. Undoubtedly, we want to have the service. If the number of people amasses, the need for a building will materialise. There is no doubt that Bamford, in his report, saw that there was a need for that. The Minister also highlighted the fact that he had transferred money from one part of the mental health service — the hospital service — to the community service. What I did not hear, however, was whether the envelope had increased. Are we actually dealing with the huge numbers of people who continue to suffer mental illness? Have we invested? That has not occurred on the scale that is needed. Certainly, I understand that it is one of the reasons why Michael McGimpsey may not have developed the service that the Minister talked about. At that point, there was a lack of

funding. Mr McGimpsey was under significant pressure from the Finance Minister and was unable to fully address the needs of our health service and the mental health of our constituents. We need more funding as well as a change of direction.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the high prevalence of poor mental health in Northern Ireland; notes that a previous world mental health survey stated that the Province has the world's highest recorded rate of post-traumatic stress disorder and that violence had been a distinctive cause of mental health problems here; acknowledges that trauma is one of the most hidden legacy issues of the Troubles; accepts the need to support and restore good mental health for people with difficulties; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to support the creation of a new international mental health centre for Northern Ireland that would be a world-class facility for all.

Oversubscribed Schools

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 to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Storey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increase in the number of children who are seeking a place in primary schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to review the current enrolment procedures to ensure that all children are able to attend their local schools.

Over the past number of years, the House has witnessed a number of debates on the importance of dealing with surplus places in our schools. However, the way in which it has been handled at times has broadened to the extent that it could be described as farcical.

We have been treated to examples of 80,000 surplus places in the system, and we have been encouraged to have a picture in our mind of large numbers of teachers standing in front of empty classrooms all over Northern Ireland. At one stage, there was panic around the issue, as we were encouraged by the Minister and his officials to engage in wholesale closure using area planning as the vehicle. That was another wonderful scheme from Sleepy Hollow in Bangor. The hit lists were published in the press, and all of us received correspondence from our constituents about the future of their school. The Education Committee wrote to the Department about the statistics and, of course, discovered that the 80,000 was not really 80,000. Suddenly, we did not hear that statistic any more.

Of course, we now know that the number of teachers is linked to the number of pupils and that the system regulates that very effectively on an annual basis. We also know that savings achieved from closures are often minimal and that school closures have more to do with a doctrinaire view about school size. In recent years, that was influenced by Montgomery County. We also know that there is no direct correlation between school size and educational outcomes. Because of the complicated procedures developed by the Department of Education over many years to progress — or to prevent — the building of new schools in many areas, we have many old

school buildings that no longer reflect the needs of their communities.

We have also learned that school populations rise and fall. Between now and 2020, it is estimated that there will be approximately 13,000 more pupils in the primary system. By 2025, the post-primary population will be the same as it was in 2012, despite the present decline, and, even in periods of decline, there are areas where there is constant growth. I admit that managing this is complex and needs a little more sophistication than has been shown in some of the current attempts by the Department.

Two examples will suffice to illustrate the point that I am trying to make here this afternoon. Victoria Park Primary School in east Belfast is a good example of how not to manage enrolments. The school is an example of an amalgamation of three primary schools in east Belfast: Mersey Street, Sydenham and Strand. At the time of the amalgamation in 2005, a new school was promised. The Belfast Education and Library Board gained planning permission for a 14-class school, which was considered to be a sensible number of classrooms for a new urban school. It was in the process of undertaking site works at Sydenham to begin the preliminary work, when the Department announced a moratorium on all school capital projects in 2008 — surprise, surprise. Despite that setback, the new school, which had moved a number of its pupils into temporary accommodation to facilitate the capital works, continued to flourish. The creation of a new school coincided with an increase in the number of young families in the area to the point where, every year, 60 children are being enrolled in P1 and a number of children who live beside the school cannot now get into that particular provision.

Here is the point: the BELB has now been given the go-ahead to begin the work on the new school, which, we hope, will open in 2014. However, on the day that the news was relayed to the board, the school received a letter stating that its P1 intake had been cut from 60 to 50. Everyone was astounded, except the Department, which, despite being shown figures to the contrary, has always believed that the school should now have only 12 classrooms and not 14. To make it fit, it needed to reduce the intake, resulting in composite classes. Who in their right mind approaches planning a new school in an urban environment with 12 classrooms? There are more people who live beside the school in Connsbrook Avenue who are unable to get their children into the school, and, most likely, there will be 17 pupils standing

with their teacher in the schoolyard on the day that the new school opens, because there is no space for them in the new provision. Surely that is not how we plan our schools estate. That is called snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. What should have been a good news story has all the makings of another disaster from the Department. So, even when everyone works to achieve the Minister's policy of school rationalisation and the board of governors and the principal of the school effect a very successful amalgamation, there is total frustration with the Department's approach in the area and uproar that there are no places for local children.

Is that an isolated incident or a blip in the system? No. Last summer, we were treated to the spectacle of children in the Western Education and Library Board area whose rural school had been closed and whose homes backed onto Edwards Primary School being told that they could not attend the school. It was their nearest school, but the Department told them that they had to attend a school nine miles away. It took lobbying for most of the summer to sort that issue out. On this occasion, I thank the Minister for the Department's intervention when, at last, good sense prevailed.

Those are just two examples of an increasing number of cases that, I am sure, Members will endorse and rehearse from their own experience. What is the solution? We need a better way of managing school enrolments, and we should stop trying to manage them from Rathgael. We are continually told that the Department is becoming responsible for policy and strategy, yet the officials seem happiest when they meddle in operational issues. Enrolments used to be managed locally by boards that knew the circumstances and were responsive to population changes.

The Department should issue clear guidance to primary school boards of governors to ensure that criteria reflect reality. The top criterion should be that children should be admitted to their local school. Finally, the Department should abandon the phoney area planning process, which is an attempt to close schools. It should institute a proper, locally based procedure involving school authorities where local areas can properly plan the enrolment of pupils for their locality with the appropriate flexibility without the threat of wholesale closures, which we all know are unlikely, and without operational interference from the Department.

Before I came to the House this evening, I met a member of the board of governors of Ashfield Girls' High School, which is not far from this Building.

Today, Ashfield Girls' High School received a letter from the Department telling it that it will reduce its intake. The Minister is aware of the issues around the future of Knockbrea High School and Newtownbrea High School and of all that is going on with Orangefield High School. Part of the arrangement was that there would be an increased enrolment for Ashfield Boys' High School and Ashfield Girls' High School. Now we are told that those schools will not be allowed to do that. Will someone please get a handle on the Department on those issues? Rather than this ill-thought-out, ill-prepared and ill-planned process, the Department should work with schools and local communities.

The Minister has rightly encouraged area learning communities. However, when it comes to area plans, it seems that the two worlds are far apart. There needs to be a change of focus and emphasis. We need to instil a process in our system whereby local children have access to their local primary school in a way that ensures that the school estate is maximised to its best potential.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member opposite for tabling the motion. Indeed, I am content to support it. However, I am sure that he will not be surprised that I wish to raise what I think are some pertinent issues that have emanated from his words.

I also very much support the principle of children attending their local primary school. Indeed, I am convinced that the sustainable schools policy and the area planning process will help to create a school estate that facilitates the preferences of as many parents as possible. Moreover, as hundreds of millions of pounds have been invested in the local school estate in recent years, it is prudent that we invest our resources in the best way possible and in the right places so that current and future changes and demographic patterns can be forecasted and facilitated.

That context has informed a wide-ranging discussion around area-based planning and the future of education provision in local communities across the North. Thankfully, that discussion, to a large extent, has accepted the rationale for change and grasped the need to address scenarios with innovative and, most importantly, locally based solutions. The notion

of locally based solutions is crucial when we explore the connected issue of school enrolments. As the Members opposite will be aware, local schools set admissions criteria, as they are best placed to reflect local need.

Having dealt with a number of admissions issues over the past year, I reiterate the message that local schools and boards of governors should look to ensure that all criteria are sustainable, strategic and reflect local need. With that in mind, I am happy enough to acquiesce to the proposer's wish for the Minister and the Department to initiate a review of enrolment procedures. Undoubtedly, if it is possible to increase the number of children who are placed in their preferred local school, that would be a welcome development.

Of course, we must bear in mind that we are referring to a very small number of cases: perhaps as little as 2% or 3% of pupils do not receive a place at one of their preferred options. I am not sure of international averages on admissions. However, in anyone's book, surely 97%, 98% or 99% of pupils being placed in a preferred option is a long way short of the negative situation that has been portrayed from across the Chamber. Perhaps we need a bit of perspective when we discuss the issue. That is not to belittle the experience of many parents who patiently go through the process. As I outlined, if it is possible to further increase the 98% to 100%, that, of course, would be welcome.

We must be aware of the knock-on effects of schools hiking up admissions with their back to other schools. Very often throughout the North, schools with low numbers have been impacted on by neighbouring schools' enrolments. The success of area planning and the long-awaited establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will not only help facilitate parental preference but will do so in a manner that protects the sustainability of the entire school estate.

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

The DUP should not look at the proposed review in isolation from the need for reform across our education system, be that the need to move ahead with ESA, to create a sustainable and fit-for-purpose series of area plans or, indeed, to move away from academic selection in totality. The third is a pressing need. If it is right for primary pupils to attend their local school, surely it is only right that post-primary pupils be afforded a real and tangible opportunity to attend their local school.

5.00 pm

Mr Rogers: I am pleased to support the motion. Starting school is one of the great milestones in a child's life, and that period of transition can bring a lot of stress for parents and guardians of young children. When they do not get into the school of their first choice, it can create a lot of trauma. Indeed, all the parents I know want to be able to access comfortably the local primary school that meets their expectations and their child's needs.

The oversubscription of primary school places and, for that matter, nursery school places, is, unfortunately, no stranger to many parts of Northern Ireland, including south Down. Every year, many distressed parents of vulnerable four- and five-year-olds contact me to seek reassurance, comfort and support. I am sure that many other Members of the House have the same experience.

Parents are concerned that their child will have to travel a significant distance — indeed, distances that they may perceive to be intolerable — to get to a primary school. In all those cases, the child has been rejected by one or maybe two of their closest schools — the school that would be physically, mentally and emotionally best for them. Mr Hazzard talked about 2% in that category; I think that that 2% must have rung me. I have been inundated with parents from places as far apart as Eglis, Carryduff, Loughbrickland, Newcastle and my area of Brackenagh, who were very distressed to be informed by the Department of Education that their child was being denied their first preference place.

That resulted in parents who wished to send their child to a particular type of school having a severely restricted choice and having to contemplate sending their little P1 on a journey of some miles to the nearest accessible school. I think that rural areas suffer disproportionately. The problem is intensified by the lack of transport and the distance between primary schools. That affects all sectors.

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Department of Education and the boards appear to continue to fail to respond to a strategic or long-term view. We need a joined-up approach between the three of them. While that failure is allowed to continue, oversubscription and excessive demand for school places will be an even bigger problem year on year. The Minister will tell us that there are thousands of empty seats in our primary schools, but the way to fix them is not to force

children to travel to a school that has falling rolls.

There is a very strong parental demand for school places in the maintained sector of the Catholic ethos. That is not always for religious reasons, I must add, but it is often driven by high-quality education.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the current proposals that the Minister has consulted on in relation to the common funding formula will add an added dimension to the future of those schools, given the fact that, in the Western Board area, particularly in the maintained sector, you still have 76% of schools that will lose a substantial amount of their income?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree fully with him.

We believe that the situation cannot be allowed to continue. Minister, I realise, as other Members have said, that this is a very difficult issue. The idea of a temporary variation is fine in the short term. Time does not permit me to go through all the examples, but to take just one or two.

St Ita's was grateful for its temporary variation, but, year on year, it is oversubscribed, just like its colleagues in St Joseph's in Carryduff. Because of such demand, local children cannot attend their local school. What is that doing to the community? What is it doing for parental choice? Schools such as Brackenagh West have places for seven classes, but are being treated as a six-classroom school. They do not need more space; they just need increased enrolment figures. Roan St Patrick's in Eglis is just baffled as to why its proposal has been rejected, when a nearby one has been successful.

Minister, we need a strategic approach that takes on board all the factors: data, both census and Church data; the availability of alternative schools in the area; the effect on the community and so on. We must manage our schools estate effectively, especially in rural areas, and we must ensure that our children can attend their local primary school. We must provide a sustainable and fair solution to this annually recurring problem.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, welcome the motion, especially the call to review the current

enrolment procedures to ensure that all children are able to attend their local school. We support the motion, and I am glad to hear that the Minister is happy to instigate a review, if I heard correctly.

The motion is a noble idea, if only the landscape was clear and the direction that we are going in was clearly signposted. I will deal with the debate mainly at a strategic level. At the weekend, I started a jigsaw puzzle, and, as always, I tried to do it without looking at the picture. That is when I realised that that is what our schools are doing. They have a picture in their mind based on how they have seen things in the past. What they know and have experienced have helped to form that picture, but in area planning, five education and library boards are all parts of the picture. All are told that they fit together, but no one has any idea what the whole picture looks like. We all know that it is a slow process, but there is absolutely no time frame to work to, which means that everyone is going at different speeds, if, in some cases, at any speed at all. Most people complete the edges first and then fit their picture into the frame. However, in our education system puzzle, we not only have no idea of the picture but we have no idea of the framework or the edges of the individual parts, and it is very likely that the school or library board next door has the pieces that belong to our picture. Until this framework is known and understood, area planning should be put on hold. I agree with Mervyn Storey on that. We should review the numbers going into primary schools once we have a proper framework.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Today's debate is rather similar, except that we are debating how to set the framework for each smaller individual picture: the relationship of the primary school in our area with other primary schools and their relationship with all the other schools in Northern Ireland. Once again, we have no idea where the boundaries are or who holds that information. In the midst of that, we now have a move towards shared education. So the original picture to which everyone is trying to work — let us describe it as black and white — is suddenly being changed. Yet all anyone knows is that the change is as broad as it could be and that the picture is probably now in colour.

Today, we call for a review so that all children can go to their local school, but there is no framework to work within. As already touched on, the original picture or puzzle was based on some 85,000 empty places when the Committee studied it. When we looked at the

figures in more detail, the number ended up being closer to 65,000. When we then looked at predicted future trends, we realised that, by 2025, we were back to the same figures that we started with. I am not quite sure where our framework is or that the direction and number of places are known. It is all appallingly vague. We seem to have set ourselves on a course based on macrofigures rather than individual school numbers, and it is here that we need the dynamic, flexible system that allows schools to adapt to changes in numbers as they arise. As Mr Storey said, it is a complex system, but it need not be. It just needs the will to make flexibility work. That is how we should do it. Schools have to do that all the time with their budget because we have a Department that changes everything all the time.

I will mention three further factors. We have a disastrous development proposal system that flags up possible changes or school closures before decisions are even made. That ends up being death by a thousand cuts. That, too, needs to be totally reviewed and become more flexible. We also have schools with numbers that are capped or changed in line with the politics of the Department or Minister or for other reasons. This capping must be more flexible. We also have, in a little more detail, the guidelines on how children are to be allowed into schools, which, as we heard from Sinn Féin, are allowed to be different in every area. That may sound sensible, but, at the same time, there is no consistency in that, and we find that many parents are left outside.

We must not forget parental choice, as I think that we all believe in that here. In reality, today's motion wants every child to be able to go to their local school but no other.

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

Mr Kinahan: We have to be careful what we ask for. What we really need to be able to solve this problem is the framework and the picture. I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Lunn: I think that this is a timely motion, given that the timetable for applications and admissions is about to click in, and I am very happy to support it. It is a fact that most children do achieve a P1 place in the school of their parents' choice. To me, the motion highlights the difficulties encountered by a small but significant number, as Mr Hazzard said, who do not achieve that. Indeed, in some

extreme cases, the process does not really deliver a remotely satisfactory outcome.

I wonder why we are in this situation, given that there are whatever number of empty desks; I have heard 80,000, 85,000 and 65,000 mentioned. The Committee never did get to the bottom of that, but I think we established that there are around 50,000 empty desks in primary schools and that the primary population has risen by only about 1,000 pupils in the past five years. So, why is it so difficult? That small rise, which represents 0.6% of the population, was entirely predictable from available data such as birth rates and census figures. We must be able to plan ahead.

I want to talk about the Department's temporary variation policy, which does seem to work at times. I acknowledge the Minister's use of that policy to relieve pressures, and he used it again this year. The anomalies are there every year and are caused, in my opinion, by too rigid an application of the rules. The policy outlines a number of factors that the Department does not consider to be sufficient reason to grant an additional place if there are alternatives available in the area, and I will just list them. They are: the pupil's residence in a particular parish; the fact that the pupil is an eldest child; a pupil who has a sibling connection with the school but who is not next in line for a place; a pupil who has listed the school as their first preference; and previous attendance of other family members or any other connections with the school. Those are the reasons that the Department does not want to take into account, but they are actually the reasons why you should allow admission or temporary variation, and, leaving out the parish consideration, they apply to both sectors.

Also, in the case of maintained schools, the Department does not take account of parish boundaries. That brought about a situation in my constituency where the Department insisted that a child should apply to the nearest Catholic school, which was actually in the next parish, only to be turned down by that school because they do not live in the parish. Where is the common sense in applying a policy like that? Mr Rogers talked about St Ita's in Carryduff. You are not the only one who got phone calls about St Ita's. One child who was turned down by St Ita's and two other Catholic schools in the area has, as far as I know, finished up in a controlled primary on the outskirts of Belfast. That is hardly satisfactory.

Staying with the maintained sector, I wonder whether the Department really understands the strength of loyalty to the parish that exists and

the strong desire of Catholic parents to see their children educated in the primary school attached to their home parish. I also wonder if it realises what effect it has on a second or third child when they have to go to a different school from that of their elder brother or sister. Indeed, that is not solely confined to the maintained sector. In September, some schools will have to decide whether to admit siblings or children who reside in the parish. They will undoubtedly have to prioritise parish residents, but, according to the very rigid guidelines, that is not a clear case for a sensible temporary variation.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments today. I hope that he will agree that a measure of common sense would cure most of these problems, as, indeed, would — I will watch for Mr Storey's reaction — passing the ESA Bill and taking a realistic approach to area planning. We need to do these things in sequence; we always come back to that. I will leave it at that. I look forward to hearing from the Minister. We support the motion.

Mr Craig: I support the motion. I listened with interest to what Members said. I think that we all recognise that there are, indeed, some complexities in planning school systems and that birth rates and population movements in different areas have to be taken into account. The desirability of schools is an unknown factor that is down to parental choice, and we also have to consider different sectoral needs and how those change in geographical areas. Speaking as someone who has a bit of experience of doing complex project work, I can say that it is doable for the reason that the information is there. There have been a number of debates in this Chamber in recent years on the issue, and the thing that gets me is that the information is sitting there. A lot of it, such as birth rate trends, where people live and where they are moving to, is held by local government. A lot of it is out there. Government have those statistics and those facts and figures.

5.15 pm

The real in-depth issue is this: how do you plan all of this — planning is critical — and how do you match up the birth rates, the figures and where they are likely to want to go to school with the existing school infrastructure? This is where we get into what I call reality. I remind the Minister that, three years ago, we got ourselves in a situation, particularly in Lagan Valley, when we looked at preschool provision. All of a sudden, we ended up hundreds of places short. The question in my mind was

this: how did the planners in education allow that to occur? It took three years for that situation to be turned around and fixed. Minister, surely alarm bells should have gone off in somebody's head about the issue of primary school provision. It took three years to fix the preschool issue, and you do not need to be a genius to work out that, all of a sudden, this year, those children started flooding into our primary schools in Lagan Valley, and lo and behold, we found underprovision in primary schools right across Lagan Valley. With the exception of one or two primary schools, all of them were oversubscribed. If that came as no surprise to me, having watched the previous three years' figures, how come the Department was caught out? There is something fundamentally wrong with the way the Department is planning the provision, Minister. I plead with you to look at that and get it fixed, because, if it is not fixed, we will end up with schools closing down and, a few years later, us ultimately going in and building new schools to replace the ones that we just closed. If you do not believe that that happens, let me give you a very clear example of what was proposed in Lagan Valley. About six or seven years ago, a proposal was put on the table to amalgamate four schools in the south end of the town into one because of falling enrolment numbers. At the time, that looked sensible until people started to look at it in more depth. Today, three of those schools are now filled to the brim, and there is only one with underprovision. What would have happened if we had amalgamated those four schools? There would never have been the capacity in the single school to take the pupils that are now there. Thankfully, that never happened, because people with local knowledge intervened and tried to stop that. I now see a similar proposal coming on secondary provision. There is talk about amalgamating secondary schools to create a school with 1,400 pupils, but the figures show that, within five years, —

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

Mr Craig: — there will be almost 2,500 pupils at that school. Planning needs to be real and local, and it needs to deal with local people and local facts.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Craig: That is where the system is failing at present.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak. All board areas have schools in the primary and post-primary sectors where demand outstrips availability. All schools have an admissions criteria guide. The main criteria that are used to select a child to attend a school include the catchment area and family relationships such as whether any siblings attend.

Parental preference may not always match the end result for some families. In certain schools, enrolment figures can outweigh the admissions criteria. It can be frustrating for many parents when provision is made or priority given to those who attain compulsory school age at the time of admission or whose siblings are already at the school.

Members have given examples, and I have witnessed many situations when it came down to two remaining places, with children from different families having the same priorities. Those schools had to make the hard decision of choosing one child over another. From listening to parents, I know that those decisions can have devastating consequences not just for the family but, in some cases, for the school. When a family has lost out on a place, I am aware of conflicts involving parents, schools, boards of governors and principals, with parents threatening to cut all family ties with a school. The obvious fallout is that a generation of children will miss out on attending a school in their local community.

Recently, I heard from a parent that a principal informed her that, if she sent her child to a certain nursery school, there would not be a place for that child in his primary school. That school is bursting at the seams. It should not be up to any one individual in a school to apply the admission criteria. That should rest with those who are tasked with and delegated the authority to apply a school's admissions criteria properly. They should do that within the guidelines, but that is not always the reality.

I welcome the Minister's work to date to ensure that some schools have been allowed to expand to meet growing demand and increase enrolment. Pragmatically, though, considerable work still needs to be done, and the Department needs to rise to the challenges. I would welcome a review of the current enrolment procedures so that children entitled to provision in their community have their needs met and their families do not have to make lengthy trips to schools that, in certain cases, are 10 to 15 miles away. As a member of the Education Committee, I have raised that issue with the

Committee and, indeed, with the Minister. I have also raised the issue of the decline of the small rural Protestant schools along the border.

In my own area, the parental preference of some families is to send their children to a school in the controlled sector a few miles across the border in Strabane, as opposed to one that is 15 or 20 miles the other way. Those parents view their nearest controlled school as the one that is two miles across the border. In any review, cross-border provision also needs to be addressed.

Although the motion looks at oversubscription in the primary-school sector, we cannot lose sight of the issues that also exist in the post-primary sector.

Mr G Robinson: As someone who represents an area where educational challenges are commonplace, I believe that the debate is a pointer to how we deal with pupil attainment in schools in such areas. There are two oversubscribed schools in my constituency, which means that parents are spending cash that they can ill afford to take their children to schools further away. That only deepens the problems of deprivation. It is, therefore, essential that an attempt is made to fund places in schools that are tagged as being oversubscribed.

The very fact that schools are oversubscribed is proof that local people see them as an essential part of the community because of the high standard of education that they deliver. Enabling children to attend their local school is a real benefit for a deprived area because parents will have additional money that would otherwise be spent on transport. This is a means to protect employment locally and to ensure that children receive the best possible education so that they can maximise their chances of obtaining good employment and help to reduce educational challenges.

I understand that it is not cost-effective for some schools to stay open, but those schools generally suffer a shortage of pupils. The debate is about schools that are oversubscribed. It is essential that our young people learn the basics of education in surroundings close to home, with suitable funding and prospects of ultimately benefiting their local, and the Northern Ireland, economy.

The Minister must review enrolment policy to ensure that our children and their future benefit by attending local schools. I support the motion.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht agus roimh an deis labhairt inniu. I welcome the debate and the opportunity to speak in it.

There has been a slight increase in the number of children seeking places in primary schools. There have been some difficulties for children in accessing the school of their choice or, should I say, the school that is the preference of their parents. However, as in a lot of the debates that take place in the Chamber, we should not exaggerate the problem. There are enough problems in education without exaggerating issues that are not really a problem.

The most recent figures inform us that 158,914 children are in the primary education system. Of that number, 865 did not get their first-choice school. That is unfortunate, but it is not a major problem. Sean Rogers effectively dismissed the statistics in a flippant remark to the effect that the 2% who do not get their first choice have been in touch with him.

It is unfortunate that not every child gets the school that is the first choice, but it is only a small percentage overall. Of course, we should always seek to make improvements to the system, where and when we can, because, although statistics tell a story from a certain perspective, they do not convey the disappointment or anguish of the parents whose child cannot get enrolled in a local school. Furthermore, statistics do not tell the full story of the inconvenience for parents whose child may have to travel a considerable distance to attend another school. Nevertheless, it is difficult to envisage a system in which the preference of parents can be guaranteed at all times. Unfortunately, on some occasions, that will just not be possible.

Jonathan Craig spoke about examples in his constituency whereby proposed planning for schools, had it taken place, would have resulted in chaos and mayhem. However, the fact is that that did not happen. The system has been flexible and agile enough to take local difficulties into account and, on most occasions, that happens.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for giving way. As for flexibility, in Lagan Valley, ESA not being implemented created the inertia in the education system, which has now been rectified by the population increase. It was not good planning or listening to locally elected Members or anyone else that allowed schools to be maintained; it was a lack of inertia in the system.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not qualified to speak about issues in his constituency, but I will reiterate the figures. Around 600 children out of nearly 160,000 did not get a place. That is not bad going by any standards. If the Minister were to get a report on how he had done, I would say that it would be "excellent so far". Perhaps there could be slight improvement, but it would be very difficult.

5.30 pm

The way to address this issue is through the area planning process. It is through area planning that we are most likely to identify the projected need in any given area, and it is in the context of area planning that schools should be allowed to grow and expand.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Eirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo. I support the motion.

The best way to illustrate the issue is by reference to examples of what is happening on the ground with individual schools. I have been approached by a number of schools in my constituency, including St Brigid's in Glasdrummond and St Patrick's Primary School in Crossmaglen. The board of governors of St Brigid's tells me that it is extremely concerned that it can admit only some of the children in its catchment area and has to refuse others. However, all those children are part of the local parish and community. Children are being separated from their peers at a very important stage in their development.

The board of governors also expressed concern about the distances that some children will have to travel. Indeed, the principal has been in correspondence with the Department over a number of years and has achieved temporary variations, one in 2012-13 and another in 2013-14. In 2013-14, a temporary variation was granted to admit 22 children, but, unfortunately, that left eight children who wanted to attend the school but who did not gain access. The baptismal records from the local church clearly indicate that there were 42 baptisms in 2011, and the likelihood is that all those children will be seeking places in the local primary school. There is also substantial house building in the area, so it is very clear that the trends are there. Where there are strong trends, the Department

needs to respond to them in an adequate way and not just by temporary variation.

The capacity of St Patrick's Primary School in Crossmaglen, based on the number of classrooms, should be 377. The current admissions number is around 305. Obviously, the school wishes to assert that it has the capacity to admit all the pupils who apply but, unfortunately, is unable to do so. One of the criteria for admission to the nursery in St Patrick's is that children are admitted ahead of others if St Patrick's is going to be their feeder primary school. It seems unfair and illogical that children are being denied access to the feeder primary school that, one year previously, was the same primary school that was the basis for their admission to the nursery.

Despite being acknowledged as an area of social deprivation, Crossmaglen is a very vibrant area with a strong proud people. It has a great sense of community and collegiality, and there is great support for the local school. There is a deep sense of unfairness when children who live within a few hundred yards of the primary school do not gain admission to a school that their relations, neighbours, family and parents attended and instead have to attend another primary school that is sometimes in the region of three to six miles from their home.

St Patrick's Crossmaglen is a growing school. The Minister will know that; he has visited it. Over the past five years, enrolment has grown. The school has increased by over 20%, and temporary variations have been granted in three of the past four years. So, obviously, there is a very clear trend there, and the Department needs to respond to it.

Both schools wish only to be in a position to admit children who are within their catchment area. They are not seeking to take pupils from any other primary school. So, I ask that common sense prevails in these and all cases and that the Department recognises the trends in population and attendance and responds appropriately to them.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I know that I am not the only MLA who has been contacted by bewildered parents who have previously been given the news that no place was available at their local primary school for their child.

The House is often told about the endemic problem of empty school places. It is a problem for the current Minister in particular, as it has come to the fore under successive Sinn Féin

Ministers. Yes, our school estate is unbalanced, and the area planning process could, and should, have been the major solution to that. Unfortunately, as it has transpired, the process that is in operation is almost as inept as the way that the Department first handled it. So, yes, there is a problem with empty spaces, but, as the motion states, there are also schools that are coming under greater pressures as local demand increases. It is really not that difficult a logic to understand. Local children should, of course, not only be entitled to a place at their local primary schools but actively accommodated to attend them. I accept that some primary schools are under greater demand than others and that there are cases where, for whatever reason, parents prefer to send to children to other schools. Naturally, those cases are more difficult to accommodate.

Therefore, I will keep most of my comments to local children not being awarded places at their local school. I will raise the case of one specific school. Last year, Donacloney Primary School had a P1 admission number of 30 pupils and an approved enrolment number of just over 230. The Minister will be well aware that, over recent years, places at that school have been coming under greater strain. Therefore, the Southern Education and Library Board produced a development plan that proposed increasing the school from eight classes to nine. Yet what did the Minister do? He rejected that proposal. His excuse at the time was to say that increasing the approved enrolment number would have had the potential to impact adversely on other schools in the area. The Minister will be able to confirm this, but is it not the case that, before making any development proposal, education and library boards are required to consult any schools that may be affected by the proposal? Of course, had it been the case that any of the children who were unsuccessful in getting a place at Donacloney were at least able to have been accommodated locally, some of the local anger would have been lessened. However, that was not the case. Why, Minister, did parents have to look as far away as Hillsborough for available places?

Donacloney is only one example. Others are facing the same problem and are getting treated in exactly the same way by the Department. There is a stubbornness in the Department of Education. I am not exactly sure to what extent his senior officials contribute to this attitude, but we have a Sinn Féin Minister who frequently points the finger of blame but rarely listens to genuine proposals. He may stand up here today and tell us that oversubscribed schools are a relatively isolated problem but that, on the whole, there are more

spaces available than young people to fill them. That may be the case, but, very much like his posturing over the provision of preschool places, it often comes down to a postcode lottery. Unless those excess places exist in the towns and villages that have oversubscribed primary schools, it is a total irrelevance to even mention them.

As I said earlier, it should not be a difficult logic to grasp. Primary school place provision should reflect local demand. If demand exceeds supply and there are no other schools in the immediate location, why, circumstances permitting, should schools not be allowed to increase their enrolment? It is simply indicative of the stubbornness of the Department. It does not suit its skewed outlook, and it is about time that the Department recognised the damaging impact that this is having on some of those local families unfortunate enough to find themselves a victim of it. I support the motion.

Mr Allister: I declare the interest of being chairman of the board of governors of Moorfields Primary School. Indeed, I will use Moorfields to illustrate some of the points that I want to make in the debate. It is a rural school about five miles east of Ballymena, serving a large rural hinterland. Its experience demonstrates the need for maximum flexibility with enrolment. It generally has an enrolment of about 200 or 210, with seven classes, but at the end of June this year we said goodbye to a double P7 class, because seven years ago flexibility was permitted to deal with a particular spike in demand. We were permitted to cater for two P1 classes at that point, and that worked itself right through the school. That meant that many local parents did not have to be disappointed when it came to being able to send their children to what they saw as their local school.

I question and wonder whether, if that situation had arisen in 2013, not in 2006, those parents, under this Minister, would have been disappointed, because the rigidity and necessity of control is such that their parental choice, which seems in every sphere to mean virtually nothing to the Minister, would have ranked so lowly. It is important that, in a school situation, where you have unexpected ebbs and flows, the school itself, which is seen by the locals as the hub of their community, can and should be able to accommodate their needs. It worked magnificently for Moorfields — yes, it required flexibility by staff, squeezing accommodation and all those things — and delivered to the parents the service that they require and are entitled to expect. That is how it should be, but I fear that under the present regime things

would not be so. Indeed, it seems to me that the control mentality and the driven agenda are such that, very often, common sense is driven out the door.

I will illustrate that with another situation in another country school in the north-eastern area, Culcrow Primary School in the Aghadowey district. Five years ago, Culcrow Primary School was on its knees. It had something over 30 pupils. It was facing closure. Today, having got a new principal who pulled it up by the bootstraps, it has in excess of 80 pupils. It is growing year on year, yet, under another ambit of the Minister's policy, the culling of the small schools subsidy, he is set to remove £42,000 from that school. What is that going to do to a school that has proven its capacity to grow and be a success and that is bringing a tremendous reformation to education in that country district? Suddenly, all of that is to be put at risk by the top-slicing of £42,000 of funding. That means at least a teacher. It probably also means a classroom assistant. That means that a school that is currently in an upward growth cycle is about to be curbed and sent back into the downward spiral from which it previously rescued itself.

That is why I say that you need both flexibility and common sense if we are going to have an education system that works and delivers.

5.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an deis an t-ábhar tábhachtach seo a phlé inniu, agus gabhaim buíochas leis na moltóirí ar an taobh eile den Seomra as an rún seo a chur os comhair an Tí. I welcome the opportunity to debate this important topic. I thank my colleagues, the proposers from across the Floor, for bringing the motion before the House.

The motion was introduced by Mr Storey, who went on to lambaste me about my failure to carry out policies — clueless, confusion — and say that nothing in the Department was working properly. Look at the motion: it calls on the Minister of Education to

"review the current enrolment procedures to ensure that all children are able to attend their local schools."

The motion does not present a DUP proposal on how we ensure that all local children attend their local school; it calls on me, as Minister, to do that — the person who, he spent the

opening part of his speech telling the world and its mother, cannot run the Department. That seems a wee bit of a contradiction in the motion, but we will return to that as we move on.

I would like to see the day when we come into the Chamber and Members propose motions that actually set out a proposal on how to do something and how they would resolve the issue that causes them concern. Mrs Dobson, two minutes into her speech, suggested that I would stand up and tell the House that everything was OK and did not need changed even though it did need changed. So I waited, in the last three minutes of her speech, for her to tell me how I should change it. Alas, in the last three minutes of Mrs Dobson's speech, there were no proposals on how to change the system that, she says, is so deeply flawed.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will come back to you in a minute.

Perhaps we need to reach that stage. I think that some of you have been in opposition for too long. For too long, you have got away with saying what you believe to be wrong with the situation, when, really, you need to put forward proposals that, in your opinion, would rectify the situation. Every time you make a decision, particularly a political decision, somebody will agree with you and somebody will disagree with you. That is fine. Every time you put forward a proposal, somebody will agree with you and somebody will disagree with you. When you are dealing with the admissions process for 850-odd primary schools — 24,000 individual cases each year — and you change that system, I guarantee now that at least one person will disagree because their child has been affected by the change in the system.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: The difficulty for Members opposite is this: they do not wish to make a decision, because they have not got the proposals to make the decision. They have been in opposition that long that they have got to the position where they listen to the last lobbyist through the door. The position of the last lobbyist through the door is their position. They will defend that position, put forward proposals and amendments on that position and say, "That is our position now". The difficulty with that is that the next person coming through the door might have a different opinion. I am happy to give way to Mr Storey.

Mr Storey: Is the Minister telling the House today, in the light of the lecture that he has given us, that, on computer-based assessments, the Department got it right; on levels of attainment, the Department got it right; on the common funding formula, the Department got it right? If he is, he really is not living in the real world. He is the Minister, and he knows that he is in the wrong.

Mr O'Dowd: On computer-based assessment, the providers did not get it right. We are now going through that.

Not only have I proposed levels of progression, but, let me think, the Education Committee agreed with the levels of progression and sent them to the House having agreed them. So, the Education Committee —

Mr Storey: You brought them —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Committee agreed with my proposals on levels of progression and passed them through to legislation. I believe that the Member is the Chair of the Education Committee.

The common funding formula is out to review. I spent my weekend off studying the DUP's response to the common funding formula. I was no more enlightened at the end of the weekend than I was at the start of the weekend in relation to a contrary proposal from the DUP on that matter. I plan to spend my next weekend off in a more productive fashion.

The motion asks the Assembly to note the increase in the number of children who are seeking a place in primary school. The figures produced by the Statistics and Research Agency show that the number of children starting school has, indeed, risen, but it appears that this trend has already plateaued, with projected figures showing that the number of children due to enter primary school over the next five years will remain stable at around 24,000 a year.

The motion also calls for a review of the current open enrolment procedures to ensure that all children can attend their local primary school. We are dealing with figures of around 24,000 a year. I have never distanced myself from the 80,000 empty school desks figure. It is an accurate figure that we need to deal with, and I believe that we can do so through area planning, which is proceeding to plan. It is not about providing a list of schools for closure, but

it comes back to this point: when you are in a position to make decisions, you have to make decisions. Not everybody will agree with my decisions, but, if you disagree with them, come forward with an alternative because I would be keen to listen to it.

I listened to several Members speak about individual schools in their area, which, I suspect, is them producing a press release for their local paper. They will be able to get up and say that they defended St Patrick's in Crossmaglen, St Brigid's, Donacloney Primary or the schools in North Antrim that Mr Allister referred to and that they told the Minister that the numbers in those schools had to increase. That will all look very well in the local paper, but what you did not provide me with was this: what schools in your area do you want me to take the pupils out of? If I am to increase pupils in St Patrick's, in Dollingstown or Donacloney or your local school, you need to give me a list of schools that you want me to take pupils out of. If we are to continue with a 24,000 intake every year, the pupils have to come from somewhere. So when you are writing your press release for this week's local newspaper on what you told the Minister, include an extra wee paragraph and list the schools that, you suggest, the Minister take the pupils out of so that they can be sent to your local school instead. That would be a very interesting press release. You stand up in here and identify the pupil numbers of individual schools, but the pupils have to come from a school in that locality. I suggest that as the way forward for your media strategy this week.

Legislation requires the Department to set enrolment and admission numbers for each school. The numbers are set each year in consultation with boards of governors, CCMS and the education and library boards. The open enrolment policy was brought in to enable parents to express their preference for the school that they wish their children to attend, and, in the vast majority of cases, it works. Over 96% of applicants in the 2013-14 academic year got a place in their first preference school. I am happy enough to go with the motion and review the enrolment policy, but, when reviewing it, I want to be assured that we hit at least 96% because, if we change it and do not hit 96%, it will not have been a change for the good. In fact, over 98% of children have been placed in their first, second or third preference school.

As part of the open enrolment policy, the Department is responsible for setting admission numbers for each school. We do that by taking account of the teaching accommodation

available and the physical capacity of the school. This is a straightforward process, and most schools can work well within their allocated number. The difficulty arises when schools receive more applications than they have places. Under the current legislation, schools are required to set and publish criteria that will be used to determine which pupils to admit in the event of a school being oversubscribed.

Setting criteria is the responsibility of the school. The criteria must be clearly defined and defensible because parents have the right to appeal to an independent tribunal if they consider that the board of governors did not apply or correctly apply its published admissions criteria. Local admissions criteria are down to the board of governors, who come from the community. Different boards of governors may have different definitions of local, but I have challenged a number of schools that have come to me looking to increase their numbers, saying that wee Jonny and Jane live very locally and cannot get in. When I go through the addresses of all the other pupils, I identify children who travel in from other areas, so I ask the school how, if one of their main criteria is that wee Jonny and Jane who live locally should get into the school, a pupil travelling for three or four miles got in ahead of them. The response might be, "Well, we need to get people in. There are numbers; that is our catchment area". I will ask, "Which is it? Is it numbers, pupils or the local area?". At the end of the day, it is boards of governors that decide. If wee Jonny and Jane cannot get in and children from a greater distance away are being allowed in, it is the admissions criteria of the school that are at fault and not the legislation.

As regards the admissions criteria set by schools, the Department has no role in the process other than to provide advice. I believe that, if a school sets its criteria correctly, most children will be allocated a place at their local school and the problems that we have encountered, particularly in the last year, with schools having to approach the Department for temporary variations to accommodate children that their criteria rejected will be resolved. It has been suggested to me in previous correspondence that the Department should take responsibility for setting criteria across the board. That would require a change in legislation and a standard set of criteria that may not meet the priorities and local circumstances of each and every school.

In September, my officials, along with representatives from the education and library

bards, held a series of workshops with all primary school principals and boards of governors. Members were invited. The purpose of the workshops was to discuss the admissions process and the role of boards of governors in that process and to support them in drawing up admissions criteria that are fit for purpose and reflect the needs of individual communities.

Various Members referred to the temporary variations process, which we have used this year. We received 1,050 applications for temporary variations, 637 of which were granted. Mr Allister referred to what happened with his local school in 2006, which perhaps relates to development proposals. We say to schools that come forward with temporary variations regularly that, if there is a regular oversubscription to your school, the best way to deal with that in the long term is through a development proposal that can deal with all the issues.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just give me one second.

A development proposal has to go through the processes and be advertised. The final decision is mine. I make that decision on the basis of the evidence presented to me by my departmental officials. It takes into account all the issues relevant to the area. It comes back to the point that I raised at the very start: if I increase the numbers at one school and do not take into account the effect that will have on the other schools around it, that decision can have a very serious and detrimental impact on other schools in the locality. As regards Donacloney, there is a school in that vicinity with only 50 pupils in attendance. If I were to increase numbers in Donacloney and not take that other school into account, I suspect that I would receive a delegation asking me what will happen to that school. So, we have to take into account all the numbers around the school.

I think that Mr Storey wants back in.

Mr Storey: In the case of Donacloney, why, as the Member said, did you, as Minister, reject the development proposal after the education and library board had recommended it and gone through the consultation process?

Mr O'Dowd: I suspect that, sometimes, it is left to the big, bad Minister to make the negative response. In fairness to the boards, they recognise the fact that the final decision is with the Minister. They go through their processes

and present an argument to the Minister. It is up to the Minister to agree with it or not, but that is the process. The process was followed correctly in that case.

I want to refer to Mr Allister's local school. He suggests that the process that that school went through in 2006 might have been looked at differently by this Minister. This Minister works under exactly the same legislation as was in place in 2006. There has been no change to the legislation. I have to look at a development proposal or temporary variation through that lens and come to a decision as to whether or not a school should expand. I am not sure what you mean by that. What is your local primary school called?

Mr Allister: Culcrow.

Mr O'Dowd: Culcrow. I have not removed the small schools subsidy. There was a proposal in the common funding formula review from Sir Bob Salisbury. However, I have not removed it, so I am not sure what you suggest by that.

In conclusion, what I say to Members is this: when you are dealing with around 24,000 applications every year and you introduce a formula or criteria for entry into a school, you will ultimately run into a number of difficulties in not meeting the circumstances of individual pupils or families. That is the reality of the situation. I believe that the formula and the legislation that we have in place is working well, with 96% getting into their first preference school and 98% getting into their second or third school of choice. Of course, I have no difficulty in reviewing it to ensure that we increase that rate and, if there are any anomalies in the system, that we identify them and move on. As I said at the start, however, it would be nice to come into a Chamber where somebody comes forward with a thought-out proposal rather than simply coming in and telling the Minister that he does not know what he is doing but asking him to go and review it to see whether he can find a solution to the problem in the first place.

6.00 pm

Mr Newton: I thank everyone who took part in the debate. Generally speaking, it was moderate and even-tempered. Members expressed their concerns for their constituency, though this is a problem that is not tied to one constituency. When children approach those first formal steps to get into the system of education, two concerns face parents, and those were highlighted across the Chamber.

The first is that parents want their child to get into the school of the parents' first choice. The second is that they want their children in a school where classroom numbers are manageable. The solution to the second concern seems to be so simple that it is only common sense, and common sense was highlighted during the debate rather than rigid dogma, which is, perhaps, being applied. The way to deal with overcrowding is to add classrooms and hire some of the 240 teachers supported by the OFMDFM initiative for a fixed period.

The formative years of a child's education are vital for their success in their future education, academic success in later years and success in their future employment, whatever that may be. Building a positive relationship of trust between teacher and pupils in the very early years in a class of manageable numbers is essential for future educational success. It is critical that teachers are in a classroom that has a manageable number and where they can deliver the quality of education that we want. It is critical that the teacher is able to perform his or her task in a professional manner.

The squeeze in primary school places comes from a rising birth rate. I accept that a rising birth rate is not common the whole way across Northern Ireland, but there are areas in Northern Ireland where there are significant rises in the birth rate that must be taken into account in the planning situation. Mr Storey highlighted one of those situations in my area of east Belfast, where, three schools having closed, a newbuild school was promised. In fact, there were two newbuild schools: Strandtown was promised as a newbuild school by your predecessor, and Victoria Park Primary School is supposedly a newbuild school. All the figures indicate that there is going to be a 14% rise in the birth rate. There was a 14% rise over the past five years, but, all of a sudden, the 14 classrooms that the BELB proposed were reduced to 12. All of a sudden, on 10 October, the principal receives a letter saying, "By the way, principal, your admissions number has been cut from 60 to 50". Given the circumstances, where is the common sense in that?

The Minister, responding to a question from Lord Morrow on 4 September, which was just a few weeks ago, confirmed that 150 children in the controlled sector in the Belfast Education and Library Board area did not get their first choice of primary school, and 72 in the Catholic maintained sector did not get their first choice over the past five years. Let us examine the 150 who did not get their first choice. The

Minister made much of the statistics. A total of 62 of those pupils who did not get their first choice were in East Belfast, the constituency where the 12-classroom primary school is to be built instead of the 14-classroom one. In East Belfast, 45% of children did not get into their first-choice school. The general trend in the number of children aged nought to four years in Northern Ireland is upward, and all the statistics indicate that.

I turn to some of the points that have been made by Members. Minister, the debate, as I have said, was extremely moderate. Real concerns were expressed by Members about schools in their area, recognising that area-based planning is a difficult and complex task. However, it is not, Minister, made any easier when your immediate response is to defend the status quo.

The Chairman of the Committee outlined a way forward. I have no doubt that, when you check Hansard, you will see that. His interest in this area goes beyond politics: he has a passion for the education of children and for the education system of Northern Ireland. He dropped the bombshell about Ashfield Girls' High School. A few months ago, representatives of the BELB were going around telling the schools in second-level education that they were going to lift the cap. Now, Ashfield Girls' High School is to have a reduction in numbers.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I am happy to give way.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not aware of the letter, and I have asked my officials to look into that in further detail. If Members could pass me a copy of the letter, I will investigate that further. I am happy to engage in more detail with Members about that matter.

Mr Newton: Mr Hazzard supported the principle of children attending local schools. He said that he supported area-based planning and felt that locally based solutions were necessary. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would argue against that. In fact, that is what people were arguing for. In the BELB area — you know the situation in that board, Minister — locally based solutions are denied because locally based political representatives are refused the opportunity to take part in the debate on policy. That is because you have excluded the four eligible nominees from Belfast City Council. In the South Eastern Education and Library Board, decisions are being taken without any input whatsoever from

politicians. There are three commissioners who were appointed years ago, and no attempt has been made to rectify that situation. Every decision on a school in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area is made without any local representatives having a voice. That, Mr Hazzard, indicates that there is not the local input that is necessary.

I have great respect for Mr Rogers because of the professionalism that he brings to the debate due to his background in education. He said that the first steps in education represented a major milestone in a child's life, as well as for parents. He made the case for rural schools and the need for a joined-up approach. He gave examples and emphasised the need for strategic planning. That is something, Minister, that Members seem to have identified, but they cannot see that that strategic approach is being put forward.

Mr Danny Kinahan, the Deputy Chair of the Education Committee, treated us to his jigsaw analogy. It was a very good analogy.

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

Mr Newton: I accept all his points about the overall picture. I apologise, because very good points were made by a succession of Members across the Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the increase in the number of children who are seeking a place in primary schools; and calls on the Minister of Education to review the current enrolment procedures to ensure that all children are able to attend their local schools.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.



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