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Contents

Assembly Business 1

New Assembly Member: Ms Claire Sugden 2

Standards of Debate 3

Matters of the Day 3

Private Members' Business

Cancer Drugs: Funding 4

Protestant Working-class Boys: Underachievement 19

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning 25

Enterprise, Trade and Investment 34

Private Members' Business

Protestant Working-class Boys: Underachievement (*Continued*) 43

Adjournment

Preschool Provision: East Belfast 57

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 May 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order to ask whether there is any indication from the First Minister of —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should really take his seat.

Mr Allister: The Speaker has not heard what I wish to say.

Mr Speaker: Order. I worry where the Member might be going. I will check the Member. He should not challenge the authority of the Chair. That is where it rests.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it in order to be challenged before one has articulated the point? Surely you must hear the point before you can arbitrate on the point. I want to ask this: will the First Minister come to the House to make a statement on the sustainability of the Administration, given that his partner —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: — the deputy First Minister has made —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: — an unretracted demand —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should take his seat.

Mr Allister: — that the police should not prosecute godfather Adams. How can those claims be made and Mr McGuinness [*Inaudible.*] supporting the police?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is totally out of order.

Mr Allister: Are those not the bully-boy tactics that we have always seen from Sinn Féin?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am glad that I stopped the Member when I did because he is using points of order for political reasons and he is electioneering. He should stop doing that in the Chamber.

Mr Allister: What were you doing?

Mr Speaker: Order. He should stop it.

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

Mr Campbell: Are you electioneering?

Mr Nesbitt: No, I assure the Speaker that this is a separate matter. At topical questions last Monday, the First Minister responded to my question about a freedom of information request — I am quoting Hansard — in these terms:

"I think that the Member is a little confused about the law. He might like to look at section 35 of the legislation, where he will see what some people refer to as a 'ministerial veto' that can be exercised." — [Official Report, Vol 94, No 5, p22, col 1].

The legislation in question is the Freedom of Information Act. I have checked it, but section 35 makes no reference to a ministerial veto. It is important that Hansard reflects the fact that, if any Member is confused about the law, it is not me; it is the Member for East Belfast. Section 35 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 makes no reference to a ministerial veto. Perhaps you will seek clarification from the First Minister, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The Member will know that I do not comment on what Ministers might say in the House. I believe that the Member should take up what the First Minister said previously in the House directly with him. I know that the Member was keen to get that on the record; it is now on the record.

Mr Campbell: Last Tuesday, during Question Time, the Sinn Féin Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure answered a question from my colleague Michelle McIlveen in which she queried the number of events that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure had introduced. The Culture Minister used the phrase:

*"I have brought the City of Culture". —
[Official Report, Vol 94, No 6, p27, col 1].*

She said that she had done so along with her Executive colleagues. Mr Speaker, as you will know, the United Kingdom City of Culture bid was made in 2009 and accepted in 2010. In July 2010, Londonderry was declared the UK City of Culture, whereas the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, who declared that she had brought that award, was not appointed until May 2011.

Mr Speaker: Once again, the Member has his remarks on the record.

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

Mr Speaker: Quite a number of Members want to get remarks on the record this morning, for whatever reason. I will take a point of order from Mr McNarry, and then I will move on.

Mr McNarry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You will be aware that I placed in your office for consideration a matter of the day —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am going to say something about that, Mr McNarry, this morning.

Mr McNarry: May I ask then, since I am on my feet, and given that you are being very indulgent to everybody this morning, Mr Speaker, that, after your comments, I might be able to say something?

Mr Speaker: The Member will know that, when it comes to the Speaker's decisions, they are final. I have made my decision on the two matters of the day that were received in the Business Office this morning. If the Member will be patient, I want to say something before the business of the day on the judgement that I made on the two matters of the day. I think that that is important.

New Assembly Member: Ms Claire Sugden

Mr Speaker: I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Ms Claire Sugden has been returned as a Member of the Assembly for the East Londonderry constituency to fill the vacancy resulting from the death of Mr David McClarty. This morning, Ms Sugden signed the Roll of Membership, in my presence and that of the Clerk of the Assembly, and entered her designation. Ms Sugden has taken her seat. I welcome her to the Assembly and wish her every success in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Standards of Debate

Mr Speaker: Before we move on to the business of the day, I want to make some remarks about the situation in the Chamber last Tuesday. I do not intend to take any points of order on this issue this morning. Members will be aware that I expect them to treat one another with courtesy, good temper and moderation when they are in the House. Last Tuesday, some unfortunate remarks were made in the Chamber on both sides of the House. I remind Members that they should respect the standards of debate that are here to protect the dignity of the Chamber and to avoid making comments of a personal or offensive nature. Some Members believe, when they rise in their place to speak, that the only way that they can get their point over is by being offensive to other Members. That should stop.

I consider last week's remarks closed, but I am increasingly concerned about the number of remarks that are being made and conversations that are taking place from a sedentary position. This is a debating Chamber. Members should not expect to be heard in complete silence, but a number of Members constantly conduct their private chats to the point of making it impossible for the Chair or anyone else to hear what the Member on their feet is saying. The Deputy Speakers and I will now be keeping an eye on that, and Members who continually talk disturbingly when other Members have the Floor may find that they might not be called to speak in such debates in the Chamber. A number of Members continually speak from a sedentary position in the Chamber, for whatever reason — I cannot understand why. I repeat: if Members continually do that, they will not be called to make a contribution on any debate in the Chamber for some time. Elections to other bodies will be taking place in the next few weeks, but Members still have a job of work to do in this Chamber. Elections to other places or other events are not a reason for standards in the House to be allowed to fall.

Matters of the Day

Mr Speaker: Finally, I want to say something about matters of the day, which Mr McNarry tried to raise in a point of order. Two matters of the day were tabled this morning on events over the past few days that I have not accepted. Members know that my ruling is final and that it is not in order to challenge any decisions. I fully understand that there are issues that Members may wish to discuss in the Chamber. However, Members will also be aware that matters of the day are very restricted procedures that allow only a series of short remarks rather than a fuller debate. I also remind Members that, some years ago, I made a very specific ruling on the nature of issues to be raised under matters of the day. If Members wish to debate any issue under a more appropriate procedural mechanism, they can consult the Business Office for advice. That is what I say to Members on all sides of the House: there are other procedures that Members can use to get business into the House. Members continually try to use matters of the day for political rather than procedural reasons. Members will know that matters of the day are very important issues; they are set very much to allow Members to raise issues of a very important but procedural nature. That is very important. I keep saying continually in the House that Members on all sides should not use matters of the day for political reasons, to attack another political party, or, equally importantly, to comment on an issue that a Minister has raised in or outside the House. That is not how matters of the day were ever framed by the Committee on Procedures. We really should move on this morning.

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

Mr Speaker: If it is a point of order on the issue that I raised, I will not take it. The Member needs to think very carefully about the point of order that he raises. I said at the start that, on all the issues that I am going to speak on this morning and all the events, I will be taking no points of order when I finish. If it is a matter totally different from what I have been talking about this morning, I am very happy to take it.

Mr McNarry: Without relating to the scurrilous remarks of the deputy First Minister about the PSNI —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: — and on hearing what you have said —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member really should take his seat.

Mr McNarry: On hearing what you said, including the use of the word "protocol" —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have made my ruling. The Member is a long-standing Member of the House; he understands procedures and Standing Orders in and around all these issues.

Mr McNarry: It is because I understand that I am asking the question —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: — of whether it is right —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McNarry: — to defend the right of Members to have that right.

Mr Speaker: Order. I operate an open-door policy. Members should really come to talk to me about these issues, but I advise —

Mr McNarry: You were not here this morning.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is coming very close to challenging the authority of the Chair. He needs to be very careful. I ask the Member to go to the Business Office to get advice on procedural issues. Please do not come into the House and challenge the authority of the Speaker or the Chair. We really should move on this morning.

Mr Campbell: Is everybody happy now?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Private Members' Business

Cancer Drugs: Funding

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr D McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the difficulties faced by patients obtaining funding for cancer drugs; further notes with concern the varying policy positions throughout the UK and Ireland regarding the accessibility of cancer drugs; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to undertake a review into the practices in Northern Ireland to provide greater clarity for patients trying to obtain funding for cancer drugs.

I welcome the opportunity to propose the motion this morning. Hopefully, in light of the past 15 minutes, this is something that the whole House can unite around. I am very conscious that it is an issue that affects many of us within our constituencies and among our families and friends. I also want to thank the Business Committee for facilitating this motion this morning. It is probably right to mention that, at the stage that the motion was facilitated, none of us was aware that the House was going to be touched by this terrible disease. Again, I pay tribute to our lost friend and colleague Mr David McClarty who succumbed to this dreaded disease.

10.45 am

We can be inspired by those who are suffering from cancer and fight against the disease in a very brave and courageous way. I think that it is fair to say that none of us is untouched by the disease. I am sure that all of us can think of a relative, friend or someone very close to us who has been taken by this awful disease. It is very important that we ensure that we always keep the families of those who are affected by this illness at the front of our minds.

Of course, we accept that there are budgetary constraints. There are a number of issues and pressures on our Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety at the moment. I also have to accept that, even purely by virtue of an ageing population that is living longer,

largely as a result of the high level of medical care that we now receive, there has been a considerable rise in the number of diagnoses of cancer and the number of patients who are suffering from it. I also acknowledge that, every year in Northern Ireland, somewhere in the region of £40 million is spent on funding for cancer drugs. That is to be welcomed, and I think that we can take tremendous encouragement from the fact that such a considerable slice of the budget is given to cancer medications.

However, as I mentioned in the wording of the motion, the criteria for being able to obtain these cancer drugs varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. That causes concern to our patients in Northern Ireland who will look to other jurisdictions and say, "Well, if I lived in Scotland, England or the Republic of Ireland, I would have been able to get access to this". Of course, I am quite sure that there are patients in Scotland and England who look to Northern Ireland and say, "We could get in Northern Ireland something that we cannot get here". However, I believe that that variance causes added stress and burdens to those patients and their families.

The pressure and immense strain that the terrible diagnosis of cancer puts on the individual and their family cannot be overestimated in any way. When people come to us, as elected representatives, or go to their consultants wanting to see something that will prolong their life, cure their condition or enhance their quality of life, that pressure is weighing heavily upon them. We have to be sympathetic to that. We have to try to work with such patients as closely as we can.

We also have to look at those who, at times, take matters into their own hands to try to raise funds and so on for their conditions. We can think of Stephen Sutton, a young man with terminal cancer who has raised over £3 million from his hospital bed. He was moved in such a way as to do that, and we can draw great inspiration from people like that. In the past 24 hours, we have had the Belfast marathon. I know that a number of those who ran in the marathon yesterday were seeking to raise funds for Cancer Research and other very worthy causes around this issue. The public has bought into this. The public is very moved with compassion towards patients who find themselves with this dreaded and cruel illness and disease that has cut short so many lives far too early.

So, in this motion, I want to raise two issues, and I am sure that, as the debate broadens out,

others will want to raise others. The first issue that I want to raise is around the cancer fund that is available in England. I enquire from the Minister: are there any plans to introduce a similar fund in Northern Ireland that patients can avail themselves of over here? I come back on that around the criteria issue because, although I acknowledge the £40 million a year that is spent on cancer funding, there are also very tight criteria around it. I will speak about that in relation to a specific patient, with his permission, in just a moment's time.

The other issue that I want to touch on is around hospital pharmacy. I believe that there is an issue where there is a very risk averse culture in hospital pharmacy when it comes to the prescribing and administration of a number of these medications.

This issue was really highlighted to me by a constituent, a gentleman who had a very rare form of blood cancer. I say, respectfully, that he would go from month to month getting blood transfusions, and, a couple of times, I met him just a week before he was due to get his next transfusion. It was almost as though his blood transfusion was recharging a battery, so, when he came to the week leading up to it, his energy was completely gone. He was constantly cold in the middle of summer and would come into my office with a heavy coat on because he was so cold. When he got his transfusion, it improved his condition greatly.

There was a drug available that, although not proven effective by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in the United Kingdom to use for his condition, had been proven in other jurisdictions that it would help his condition. Initially, he asked for funding through his consultant, and the Department said no because it had not been NICE-approved. The pharmaceutical company then offered a free course of the treatment on the understanding that, if it worked, the Department would pick up the bill to continue the treatment. This too was turned down. The pharmaceutical company came back and said that it would give him four courses of the treatment with no strings attached. That seemed almost to be the answer to our prayers on this issue. However, the pharmacy in the hospital refused to sign off on it, even though it was four courses of no-strings-attached treatment of this particular drug. It was only with the intervention of the Chief Pharmacist, who I pay tribute to and who is in the House for this debate, that, eventually, we got this matter addressed and hospital pharmacy signed off on it.

I described this man, his condition and how ill and weak he was. This man, towards the tail end of last year, gave me the best Christmas present that I, as an elected representative, could ever have asked for. It was in the form of this email, where he said:

*"Dear David,
A further update on my lenalidomide journey. I have now completed my four cycles. I was not very well from side effects at the beginning, but these subsided during the fourth cycle, and the drug started working in my favour. I have not required transfusion since February, and my haemoglobin level has reached lower normal limits for the first time in seven years. As a consequence, funding has been approved for one year. Angela, who is my wife, is treating me to a cruise on the Danube for my 70th birthday in June, so I am looking forward to that."*

I do not want us to lose sight of the human story behind all these statistics, and, therefore, I encourage the Minister to take on view the points that have been raised this morning. I look forward to hearing how the debate will widen out.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion this morning. It is a particularly important and emotive issue for many. We heard from the proposer of the motion about the very human aspect to this debate. The motion calls for a review into practices in the North to provide greater clarity for patients who are trying to obtain funding for cancer drugs. I fully support that. Currently, 38 drugs are available in England, Scotland and Wales that are not available in the North, and, currently, a patient needs to make a case that their cancer is exceptional to access these drugs. That is a particularly difficult scenario for many patients who are going through the trauma that is cancer.

Access to cancer drugs should not simply be because of postcode. People should have access to effective drugs, regardless of where they live, what hospital they attend or what kind of cancer they have. There has been increased focus on prevention and early detection, which is very welcome. Sadly, however, the reality remains that one person in three will develop cancer. The statistics are stark: each year, 8,700 people will receive a diagnosis of cancer and 4,100 will die from cancer.

The news is not all bad, however, and it is good that cancer survival rates have doubled in the

past 40 years. However, our survival rates here still lag behind those in comparable countries. That is a fact that we need to challenge.

Access to new drugs must form part of the discussion and debate on equitable access to new treatments for people with cancer. However, that is not all of the debate. We need a long-term, sustainable strategy that provides access to clinically effective treatments for everyone who needs them. Groups such as Macmillan and Cancer Focus have welcomed plans for value-based pricing but have equally expressed concerns that that work has, in effect, come to an end. Along with the cancer drugs fund in England, it has received only short-term funding, thereby not allowing for a sustainable long-term approach.

It has been suggested that changes that are being introduced in Scotland may offer an alternative route. That is a new system for drugs that is based on patient and clinical engagement, which is a critical aspect of this debate. I appeal today to the Minister to engage with his Scottish counterparts and with the Scottish Medicines Consortium to seek evidence of how that is working and progressing.

We need increased funding for cancer drugs. However, we need to focus this debate beyond the price of any individual drug and look at new therapies and initiatives that are required. There is also concern that the cancer drugs fund in England has created regional inequalities that simply cannot be replicated here in the North.

The cancer drugs fund does not address the root cause of why patients may be denied access to treatments. It is important, therefore, that in this debate we identify the factors that contribute to situations where drugs are deemed to be safe and clinically effective but not cost-effective. It is right that the review should gather data on the number of patients in the North who are not receiving a cancer drug that their clinicians want to use to treat their illness.

People should also know how to apply for certain drugs and, if their application is rejected, where they should turn. I support the motion. I think that it is appropriate —

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

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I think that it is appropriate that we review current practices in

the North of Ireland to ensure equality and access to treatments.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate, and I am in favour of the motion, although I would, as I will explain, like to see it go further.

The motion is a particularly important one and, to many, an emotive one, but it is fundamentally about inequality. Let me spell it out: 39 cancer drugs are not readily available here that are available in the UK. The SDLP has been campaigning on this issue for months. Along the way, we met cancer charities, clinicians and, most importantly, cancer patients who are being denied access to drugs.

Those are drugs that could lengthen their lives, sometimes by up to three years. It is therefore extremely distressing for them when they discover that if you live in Bristol you will receive the drug, but if you live in Belfast or Bangor you will not. Extending your life for three years, when your prospects are very limited and down to months, is not just life-lengthening; that is life-saving.

11.00 am

The individual funding request (IFR) mechanism currently in place for drugs that are not readily available through NICE is inherently flawed. In fact, it is skewed towards inequality. It operates using an exceptionality clause. That means that a cancer sufferer must prove that their strain of illness is unique and different from everybody else's. For the vast majority of cancer sufferers, that will be impossible to do, and, as a result, they will be denied a life-extending drug. We discovered, through meeting with charities and cancer sufferers, that the IFR mechanism was not designed for its current purpose. That system, which decides which cancer sufferers can get a drug or not, was designed primarily for cosmetic surgery. That speaks for itself.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it is almost ironic that we here in Northern Ireland, which has produced pioneers in diagnosis and medicines for cancer, suffer because we are in Northern Ireland, and we cannot have access to those drugs that we make?

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

Mr McKinney: Thank you. I welcome the intervention. It is a point that I will expand on in just a moment.

In England, as we are aware, a cancer drugs fund (CDF) is in operation that provides direct access for cancer sufferers to cancer drugs. In Scotland, just this month, the peer-approved clinical system has been put in place. That has replaced the IFR model and the clear inequalities in access that it was producing. In Wales, the All Wales Medicines Strategy Group is in place to appraise medicines before NICE. Consequently, that, too, improves access for cancer patients. However, a recent study by Bristol University uncovered that cancer sufferers in England are seven times more likely to receive the drug than those in Wales. There are varying journeys towards greater access to cancer drugs in the UK. We, however, are not yet at the starting line. When the SDLP has asked the Minister about that inequality, he has deflected it by bringing up the viability of the IFR process or even the issue of prescription charges or welfare reform.

The Rarer Cancers Foundation and others have undertaken research about the cost of a CDF model here. It ranges between £5 million and £6 million. That is significantly less than the amounts needed in England, and it is feasible, we argue, if the Minister wants it to be. It is also important to note that, due to sophisticated molecular testing, improved diagnosis is available. Clinicians are available to accurately pinpoint which drug will work for a particular individual. So a cancer drugs fund model will cost more but will be much more refined and accurate than initially imagined.

I will touch on my colleague's intervention. One of the major ironies is the difference between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK in access to cancer drugs. We have one of the most decorated and capable cancer research traditions here in Belfast. Our cancer centre is doing great work and must be commended. However, we are developing, testing, and producing those drugs here, trialling them here on the people of Northern Ireland and, after that process, many of those drugs will not be available here. It is an appalling inconsistency and one that the Minister must address. What is the point of all of that research and development if individuals cannot get the drugs at the end of that journey?

At this point I would like to commend the work of many who have helped in campaigning on the issue. Charities such as Cancer Focus NI, Action Cancer and Macmillan Cancer Support have all helped. I also note the cancer

sufferers who have assisted — people such as Allister Murphy, Una Crudden and Brian Withers. Those are all individuals waiting on a drug that is available to those elsewhere. Not one of the arguments that have been put forward by campaigners has been successfully rebuffed by the Health Minister, who has instead, as I have said, sought to drag in issues of prescription charges or welfare reform. Essentially, those in favour have won the argument. The Minister must act and act now.

The Minister has only one option and that is to say yes. The weight of the argument for a cancer drugs fund model is much too strong to be delayed further by a review, further analysis or delay. Cancer sufferers do not need a process; they need an answer. Patients should not take no for an answer, the public will not take no for an answer, and neither will we in the SDLP.

Finally, Mr Speaker, one of those who I mentioned is now on a trip. It was on his bucket list. You know what a bucket list is; it is a list of what people want to do and achieve before they die. Although he would not say it, I know inherently what he wants. He wants, on his bucket list —

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr McKinney: — a cancer drugs fund or a model that others can benefit from after he dies.

Mr Beggs: I, too, pay tribute to the many different charities that have carried out lobbying in this area and highlighted the difficulties that their members and friends are experiencing. I found particularly useful a gathering last week that was organised by Cancer Focus, which facilitated discussions around a cancer fund, along with senior medical experts and clinicians working in the field of cancer treatment.

Northern Ireland has developed its new cancer centre, and it has been responsible for significant improvements in outcomes locally. In conjunction with the centre, cutting-edge research and trials have been happening in Northern Ireland. However, the limitation of specialist drugs limits the ability to carry out some of those trials. We risk being left behind by other regions. So, it is essential that such a fund is developed, not only to help those who may be suffering from a particular form of cancer that needs specialist drugs but so that we can continue to improve outcomes for everyone in Northern Ireland.

As was said earlier, one third of us can expect to have cancer. Sadly, that proportion is increasing. With increased life expectancy, the increasing likelihood is that more of us will develop some form of cancer. It is very evident that we need to do more to keep pace with developments in healthcare in this area.

As others have said, England has its cancer fund, of about £200 million a year, and Scotland has recently developed its own new system. However, we are left with the individual funding request — IFR; a very limiting process, the conditions of which significantly reduce the likelihood of clinicians enabling their patients to access some of those specialist drugs. The condition must be unusual or the circumstances rare; one that is likely to occur very infrequently. Treatment requests for newer, developing treatments are not normally commissioned or funded by the health board, or the treatment may be commissioned only in different circumstances. So, there are very limiting circumstances.

The danger, of course, is that fewer and fewer clinicians will apply because of recognition of poor outcomes from their applications. The care of patients will therefore suffer. As I said, Scotland has developed and, just this month, is bringing into action its peer approved clinical system, which is expected to increase the availability of specialist drugs.

In December 2011, the Assembly had a similar debate, calling for the Minister to review the creation of a cancer drugs fund. What has happened since then? I have learnt that some individuals who need some of those specialist drugs have been forced to move to England to qualify for treatment. That is unacceptable. From talking to cancer clinicians, I am aware that it is not just about the drugs but about the realm of policies around the drugs. I learned recently that the waiting room in the Belfast City Hospital cancer centre is, on occasion, standing-room only. We need more facilities. I have also learned that, if the fund was introduced, we could take time to train additional staff to be able to administer the scheme and train specialist nurses etc. Again, what has happened in that regard?

Northern Ireland has fallen behind in research and we need to ensure that we are at the forefront again. It is also about scans and testing. Recently, Manuel Salto-Tellez, professor of molecular pathology, highlighted that it is about personalised treatment and identifying which patient will benefit from which specialist drugs. We need to invest more in testing, so that the right patient gets the right

drug at the right time. For years, the DUP has told us that the healthcare budget settlement is adequate. If so, why has a cancer fund not been established in Northern Ireland since December 2011, when there was clear support for it? I understand that Northern Ireland used to have the highest per capita funding in health in the UK —

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

Mr Beggs: — reflecting need. What is the situation now? Have we dropped down that league scale? Clearly, we need to improve a wide range of services, including the provision of specialist cancer drugs, to improve the health of our community.

Mr McCarthy: As others have said, this is a very serious issue. I thank Mr McIlveen, Mr Wells and their colleagues for getting it on to the Order Paper, and on behalf of all our constituents, I hope that, as a result of today's debate, strident improvements can and will be made in the very near future. Indeed, there are other illnesses in Northern Ireland that suffer from the same lack of funding and difficulties. I can think of one at the moment, and I am sure that all our MLAs are being requested to do something on behalf of MS sufferers. We are not talking about just cancer services; a lot of people with other illnesses are in the same boat.

Along with other MLAs, I had the privilege of sharing a few hours last week in the presence of some very highly professional people working at the coalface and dealing with cancer patients, and they see the total inequality for us in Northern Ireland regarding specialist drugs. Therefore, it is vital that a complete overhaul of the current process to fund life-extending cancer medicines is initiated at an early date. I am glad to see that our Minister is with us today. Hopefully, he will take in what is being said.

At present, around 10,000 people in Northern Ireland are diagnosed with cancer each year. As has already been said, we in Northern Ireland do not have the cancer drugs fund that operates across the water in England. As I understand it, the British Prime Minister has pledged another £400 million of Government money to keep that fund going for the benefit of patients living in England.

Our Assembly and our Health Department, under the leadership of our Health Minister, must surely acknowledge that our current system is simply not giving our patients in

Northern Ireland the equality of access to those cancer drugs that happens in other parts of the UK and the Republic. We must seek a commitment from the Assembly and the Executive to replace the prohibitive individual funding request process and its exceptionality clause with a new model, possibly like Scotland, which gives patients in need the best access to the treatment and the medicines that they desperately need and ensures that additional funding is available to see enhanced access to the medicines that they require.

Our gathering last week heard from the professionals that, as we know, Northern Ireland has already contributed a lot to the field of cancer research, clinical trials and new treatments. As a matter of fact, some of the medicines available on the cancer drugs fund list in England were developed and trialled at home here in Northern Ireland. But guess what? They are still not available to our patients at home. Surely that cannot be right. We need the same rights for cancer patients here to access these drugs as in England and Scotland.

We also heard about article 2 of the European Cancer Patient's Bill of Rights, which received support from MEPs across the parties. It calls for timely access to appropriate treatment and care for every patient in the EU, and that includes rapid access to the latest innovations in diagnosis and treatment. Once again, patients from here are losing out. Surely it is the duty of the Assembly to rectify that anomaly.

As at 20 March 2014 — less than two months ago — 39 medicines were available through the cancer drugs fund in England that were not available here. That simply cannot be justified. The Assembly must get behind the efforts of Cancer Focus Northern Ireland and other organisations to campaign for better and easier access to those life-saving drugs. We have a very active all-party group here in Stormont, and everyone is working to ensure that there is better access to those drugs. However, we need the support of our Health Department if we are to achieve better outcomes for all our patients.

In conclusion, it is extremely worrying to see that the number of cancer patients is increasing, despite the enormous strides and successes in services and treatments that are available, particularly at our regional cancer centre, as other Members have said. Surely we must look at ways in which to prevent the disease in the first place.

11.15 am

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I wish to commend everyone working to overcome the disease, particularly all the volunteers up and down the country who fundraise to enable more research to be done. I particularly commend —

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

Mr McCarthy: — the volunteers, staff and customers of and donators to the Portaferry Cancer Research shop, ReNew, which, in three short years, raised £100,000 to help with research.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion.

Mrs Cameron: As a member of the Health Committee, and on behalf of my constituents, I am pleased to support the motion. The dreadful effect of cancer has been felt by almost every family here in Northern Ireland, and it is right that the Assembly continues to devote time to dealing with the subject. People diagnosed with cancer have the right to expect that they will have access to the most effective treatments available. As progress is made in the research and manufacture of new drugs, it is imperative that we find ways of ensuring that cancer sufferers can avail themselves of those treatments. We have excellent health professionals, but we must ensure that we equip them with the correct tools to ensure that people have the best chance possible of defeating the disease and achieving positive life outcomes.

Recently, we have seen a number of campaigns to raise money for cancer charities, from "selfies" to "thumbs up". These have raised enormous funds to allow research to develop and continue, as well as allowing charities to provide practical and emotional support to patients and their families. This question needs to be asked: how are those diagnosed with cancer able to access the specialist cancer drugs developed in recent years? If the funding is not there, how can those drugs and treatments be availed of?

I am particularly worried to hear that a drug to help in the treatment of ovarian cancer is not utilised here in Northern Ireland. That drug is Avastin, which could extend considerably the life of terminally ill patients. Ovarian cancer is a silent killer. It often has no symptoms, and there is no routine test that women can avail

themselves of. Thanks to the profile of Jade Goody, for example, there is heightened awareness of cervical cancer and smear tests. However, ovarian cancer is often overlooked and confused with cervical cancer. Far too many women think that a smear test can pick up ovarian cancer, but it will not. Often, ovarian cancer is not diagnosed until it is too far advanced. We know that, for the best outcome, we need to diagnose and treat cancers as soon as possible, so women with ovarian cancer are often disadvantaged from the outset. Of course we recognise that there are many forms of cancer, but I would like to use ovarian cancer as an example today. I am grateful to Target Ovarian Cancer for the information that it provided.

For a drug to be routinely used in Northern Ireland, it must be approved by NICE. In the past two years, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has rejected NHS access to the drug Avastin for the treatment of ovarian cancer in the following situations: for treating women with newly diagnosed ovarian cancer; and for treating the first recurrence of ovarian cancer in women who are platinum sensitive — that is to say that a recurrence occurred some 12 months or more after the first treatment with platinum — and have not previously received Avastin. Northern Ireland follows the treatment guidance produced by NICE. Consequently, Avastin is not routinely available on the NHS. Clinicians can submit an individual patient treatment request. However, they are clear that those —

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cameron: I will.

Mr McKinney: Thank you for allowing me time. Does the Member agree that, in England, the process can point to an alternative? NICE says that there is an alternative, which is the CDF, but that alternative is not available here. When clinicians and the system say, "We are following NICE guidelines", they are not, because there is an alternative in England but not here.

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

Mrs Cameron: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his contribution.

We know that Avastin is not routinely available on the NHS but that an individual patient treatment request can be submitted. However, the NHS is clear that such requests will be rejected, as women are not exceptional cases

because Avastin could benefit a larger group of women. Consequently, no women are being treated, other than a couple who started their treatment in England, funded by the cancer drugs fund, and who are completing it now under the patient access scheme with a pharmaceutical company that has access to the drug.

I have been incredibly impressed and moved by the courage of cancer sufferers who refuse to give in and spend their days campaigning to raise awareness and to encourage fellow sufferers. I hope that the Assembly will do more, however, than offer just words of comfort. I hope that it will seriously consider how it can provide the much-needed cancer drugs and how best to fund the provision of new and effective treatments.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also support the motion.

David McIlveen referred to the tragic and untimely death of David McClarty to cancer, and I take this opportunity to offer my sympathy to his family. As someone who lost his wife to cancer 25 years ago, I fully appreciate the effects that it can have on not only the immediate but the extended family. I am grateful that there have been great advances in the treatment of cancer, but a lot more needs to be done. I suppose that that is why the motion is before us today.

Members mentioned the fact that over 30 life-extending cancer drugs are available to patients living in England via the cancer drugs fund, which are not available here, because there is no equivalent of the cancer drugs fund in the North. Cancer Focus has been concerned for some time that cancer patients here are being denied access to life-extending drugs that are available in England and will soon be available in Scotland.

The current situation disadvantages cancer patients twice. They are unable to access certain drugs, which means that they are unable to be entered into clinical trials that look at the next generation of drugs. The targeting of new drugs via molecular testing to predict the effectiveness of drugs on patients, which is personalised medicine, must be a key part of the solution. Clinical trials produce substantial savings to the drugs budget through subsidising drugs for cancer patients. The present inability to access the latest cancer drugs is having a detrimental impact on clinical trials in Belfast, and it is worth noting that a lot of the research and development of cancer drugs has happened in the North.

Macmillan Cancer Support has been campaigning for fairer access to effective drug treatments for people with cancer. It believes that people should get equal access to effective drugs, regardless of where they live, what hospital they attend and what kind of cancer they have. Access to new treatments and therapies needs to be a permanent challenge to our health services, as new radiotherapy, chemotherapy and surgery options become available. Access to new drugs must form part but not all of the debate around equitable access to new treatments for people with cancer.

Macmillan wants a long-term, sustainable solution that provides access to clinically effective treatments for everyone who needs them, and it has welcomed plans for value-based pricing. Macmillan is concerned, however, that this work seems to have come to an abrupt end, with the cancer drugs fund in England receiving short-term funding that will take it just past the next election. It believes that the improvements to the existing system could ensure fair access to effective medicines.

It would also welcome increased funding for cancer drugs in the North to improve access through the current system, but it feels that we should be debating more than cancer drugs alone. The focus of the debate needs to be broadened beyond the price of any individual drug and also look at new therapies and initiatives, including radiotherapy, surgery and screening, while factoring in the knock-on effect on existing services.

There are concerns that the cancer drugs fund in England — this has already been mentioned — has created new regional inequalities that we do not want to be replicated here. Kieran McCarthy referred to article 2 of the European Cancer Patient's Bill of Rights, and cancer patients in the North are being denied potentially beneficial treatments that are available in Britain. We need to open this debate and investigate ways in which we can, in a cost-effective manner, achieve the best outcomes for patients in the North.

Macmillan would also want any investigation to start with an understanding of the different needs for drugs for end-of-life and rarer cancers, issues that would not be solved by having a cancer drugs fund. It would like the Assembly to identify the factors that contribute to situations whereby drugs are deemed to be safe and clinically effective but are not cost-effective and how that can be addressed. It wants to gather data on the number of patients

in the North who are not receiving a cancer drug and to improve transparency throughout the system. Patients and health professionals need far greater understanding of how the system works. People should know how to apply for certain drugs and what they can do if initial applications are rejected. The process for making an individual funding request to the Health and Social Care Board IFR panel needs to be made even more transparent to ensure that the system remains credible in the eyes of the public.

I am sure that the Minister will take on board what has been said in this very important debate.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, which concerns a very important matter that affects many people across Northern Ireland. Cancer continues to be a very real problem throughout our country, and I am sure that everyone in the House has been touched by the impact of cancer through the suffering of a close friend or relative. With around 12,700 local people diagnosed each year, and over 4,000 deaths annually in Northern Ireland, cancer continues to be one of our most deadly diseases. We need to actively look at funding for cancer drugs and consider the difficulties that local patients are facing in obtaining funding for cancer treatment.

We can also learn lessons from England and Scotland, where cancer drugs funds have been developed. We need to listen to groups, organisations, professionals and patients who are at the front line in helping to fight cancer. There is clear evidence that the setting up of such funds has directly benefited thousands of patients with rare forms of cancer by giving them access to up to 39 life-extending drugs. The Assembly should continue to take cancer seriously, and I know that the Minister has made it a priority to get the best outcome for cancer sufferers and to develop work on cancer prevention and early intervention.

Over the past two years, significant improvements have been made in the timeliness of the Department's process for reviewing and endorsing NICE technology appraisals through the individual funding request system. However, difficulties remain in accessing non-NICE-approved drugs here. I appreciate that such drugs are taken at risk, but patients have to consider that risk and, with professional advice, make an assessment. They have to make a judgement and I believe that, in many cases, those who are struggling for life will take such a risk and will, on balance, proceed with such treatments, if available.

One patient I know very well is Brian Withers. His is an exceptional story. A number of Members know him, have met him and have heard his story. He has a young family, and his battle against cancer is an inspiration to us all. We all should take note of the lengths that he has gone to in order to get treatment. Fortunately, Brian was able to get advice and, through that, was able to go to England and get CyberKnife treatment, a laser-type treatment for cancer. I met him in this Building last week, and to see him out and about as a healthy man is a great testimony to what can be done through access to such treatments. I fully endorse the motion, and I think that we should be looking at such treatments and making sure that people can access them. If they are available in the rest of the UK, I believe that they should be available here.

It is regrettable that, in some cases, cancer sufferers here are unable to get access to treatments that are readily available throughout the rest of the UK and parts of the Republic of Ireland. The mainland is an interesting case study. Regional variations have developed between England, Scotland and Wales, creating a divide in cancer care. We can learn from that example. We do not want to see that happening here.

Improving access to drugs is crucial in the fight against cancer. We need to try to reduce the time required for applying for funding to access new medicines. Northern Ireland has contributed significantly to the field of cancer research through clinical trials and the development of new treatments. Some of the medicines available through the cancer drug fund list were first developed and trialled here, but are, unfortunately, still not available to local patients, which is most unfortunate.

11.30 am

Therefore, I urge the Minister to give consideration to the creation of a drugs fund and to a review of practices in Northern Ireland, which would provide greater clarity for patients who are trying to obtain life-saving drugs. That would be a more effective tool in trying to reduce the impact of cancer on those who suffer from this devastating disease. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Members on the opposite Benches for bringing the motion today. I acknowledge all those who live with cancer as well as all our professionals and our hospitals who do such great work in this field. However,

it is time to tackle the cancer drugs inequality that exists in Northern Ireland.

Patients here must be able to avail themselves of the medical help that they require. My SDLP colleague and party spokesman on health has repeatedly raised the issue in the Health Committee. The SDLP is appalled that, in Northern Ireland, citizens are denied access to treatments that could make a positive impact on their health outcomes. Why should that be? Surely this House must be tasked with safeguarding the health and well-being of all our constituents. We are, therefore, obligated to ensure that all available resources are used to promote good health in our population.

Access to cancer drugs has been raised with the Health Minister on a number of occasions. We have called on the Minister to address these inequalities in cancer drug treatment in Northern Ireland. The principal question in all this is why 38 cancer drugs should be available in England but not in Northern Ireland. As we have already heard from my colleague, the situation is even more troubling when we learn that some of these drugs are being developed and trialled here but are ultimately not available, even to some of those who helped in the trials. The lack of action on the provision and accessibility of cancer drugs is similar to the inaction that we witnessed on the need to review the health service adequately.

When I hear people speaking about cancer and cancer drugs, it is chilling because I have had personal experience of it. The two key areas that contributed to my recovery were early detection and expert medical care. We must always be mindful of and thankful for the expert care and medical treatment that I and many others received in our hospitals and specialised centres across the North. The dedicated and well-trained staff in our hospitals play a major role in the successful outcomes of treatment for our citizens. Recognition must be given to the exceptionally high standards of care that our National Health Service staff provide. We must recognise the substantial work that has been done in cancer research and treatment.

Colleagues, it is extremely positive that cancer survival rates have doubled over the past 40 years. That is testament to the good work carried out by our committed doctors and nurses across the North. I would not be here without them.

As legislators and public figures, we must ensure that our communities receive positive public health messages. More must be done, however, to address the more than 4,000

deaths here every year as a direct result of cancer. The key to dealing with this is investment in early diagnosis and screening campaigns. Early diagnosis can make a huge difference to outcomes for patients. The earlier cancer can be diagnosed, the sooner the appropriate treatment can be put in place. The chance of survival is significantly higher if we can detect cancer early, but that requires those who experience the symptoms to come forward as soon as possible. I urge everyone who notices any unusual or persistent changes in their body to attend their GP and have themselves checked out. The symptoms of cancer are not always easy to spot, but indicators are often ignored.

The work being carried out by cancer charities and organisations is helping to communicate messages such as this and contributing towards a higher rate of early diagnosis. Together, we can beat cancer, but, until that day, it is important that we all look after ourselves and our families. When we receive a cancer diagnosis, we need to get the right drugs at the right time. When I hear about dealing with cancer, I realise that I was one of the lucky people.

Mr Gardiner: First, I thank Mr McIlveen for bringing the motion before the House. I share the experience of many other people who have lost loved ones to cancer: I lost my mother and two sisters, and I know the stress, strain and suffering that they went through. I read the following information on the Cancer Research UK website:

"The Cancer Drugs Fund is money the Government has set aside to pay for cancer drugs that haven't been approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence ... and aren't available within the NHS in England. This may be because the drugs haven't been looked at yet or because NICE have said that they don't work well enough or are not cost effective. The aim of the fund is to make it easier for people to get as much treatment as possible.

The Cancer Drugs Fund is for people who live in England. The governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland decide on how they spend money on health and so far haven't decided to have a similar programme."

The last phrase saddened me. It said that we in Northern Ireland, just like the Administrations in Edinburgh and Cardiff, have not got our act together sufficiently to establish the best possible arrangements for patients who are

suffering from hard-to-treat cancers. Devolution was supposed to make things better not drag its feet.

The fund in England is worth £200 million a year and operates over a five-year period. Again and again, I read the words, "if you live in England", and that point is brought home to me again and again as each drug is made available in England. I ask the Minister why such a fund cannot be established here so that we can have parity with England. I know that there are financial constraints, but we must surely be spending money on things that are less of a priority.

I am concerned about the rigidity of the thinking in our Health Department. Recently, I raised the issue of having super paramedics, as they do in England and Wales, as a way of cutting our accident and emergency pressures. The answer that I got basically amounted to, "We do not do that." Is the answer the same on having a cancer drugs fund here?

I think that it is time that we started to look at what is happening elsewhere in the United Kingdom and try to learn from it. Minister, a cancer drugs fund would be a good place to start. I hope that we can conquer cancer in Northern Ireland through our Department and health service and that the rest of the United Kingdom and the world can learn from that.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): It is good to have the opportunity to have the debate. I listened to the issues that Members raised and am grateful for the opportunity to respond to them.

I welcome the motion, and I think that it is right to have had a debate about access to cancer drugs. It is an issue that we all should have an interest in, given its importance. It is also an issue that will have touched everyone in the Chamber as they will have lost some friend or loved one through cancer. That is a certainty. Of course, that has been driven home even more during the past few weeks with the loss of our colleague David McClarty, whom Members have rightly paid tribute to.

The number of people who receive a diagnosis of cancer is rising simply because people are living longer. Access to effective treatments for the population of Northern Ireland, including access to cancer drugs and other specialist medicines, is an important priority for me and my Department.

The annual spend on cancer drugs in Northern Ireland is over £40 million, and that figure is not capped or constrained by ring-fencing. It has also increased by approximately £15 million during the past three years. That has been the level of increase during my period in office. Cancer has always been a priority for me from the first day that I came into office, and the first thing that I dealt with was the overhang of the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital. Mr Beggs quite rightly pointed out issues of overcrowding at the cancer unit at the Belfast City Hospital. That was precisely why I chose to go ahead with the development of the satellite radiotherapy centre at Altnagelvin Hospital against the views of the previous Minister. Had I not made that decision, we would have been hitting real problems come 2016/2017 and beyond because capacity would have been seriously affected as a consequence.

It is important that people have access to medicines that are evidence based. In Northern Ireland, we are guided by the recommendations of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in determining whether cancer drugs should be routinely available.

The arrangements for accessing cancer drugs in Northern Ireland are as follows: the Health and Social Care Board is responsible for the commissioning of cancer drugs in Northern Ireland; and all NICE-approved cancer drugs are available to patients in Northern Ireland and are either recurrently funded or available via a cost-per-case mechanism.

Under revised managed-entry-of-drugs arrangements that were introduced by the Health and Social Care Board from 1 April 2014, cancer drugs not approved by NICE but approved by the Scottish Medicines Consortium (SMC) will be available to patients in Northern Ireland subject to clinical approval.

For cancer drugs not approved by NICE or the SMC, the Health and Social Care Board has a clear process by which those drugs can be made available to patients by means of an individual funding request that sets out the clinical circumstances which support the request. I should clarify for the House that this was not designed for cosmetic surgery, and it is not helpful for Members to make such statements. It was designed to rule on drugs when clinical and cost-effectiveness have not previously been proven. It is a generic mechanism that has been in place for around five years. Let us not get involved in coming off

with silly statements that do not stand up to scrutiny.

It should be noted that these arrangements are not restricted to cancer medicines. They also support access to other specialist medicines for patients with other serious illnesses.

The number of IFRs received by the board has increased steadily. Over the past eight months, the IFR panel has processed an average of 15 IFRs for cancer drugs each month. The IFR panel meets weekly. Outcome decisions are communicated to the requesting trust by email. In practical terms, those decisions are usually sent the next working day or, at most, within five days.

There is a very high approval rate for IFRs for cancer drugs. Recent figures provided by the Health and Social Care Board on IFRs that are specific to cancer drugs have shown that between January 2012 and March 2014, around 90% of the 281 requests were approved, and only nine requests were not supported. I have heard the claim that access —

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, certainly.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister acknowledge that, because of the tight conditions, there is a huge risk that many clinicians will not apply?

Mr Poots: I do not believe that the IFR process is perfect. I am currently in consultation with representatives from some drugs companies and, indeed, other groups to look at the issue. I am quite taken by what the Scottish Government and Parliament have been doing. They replaced their IFR-type process with a new peer-approval system, which is being led by local consultants and allows clinicians to prescribe medicines that are not accepted for routine use by the Scottish Medicines Consortium. The Scottish Government have advised that the new approach by the SMC will be in place by April 2014. The first decisions under the new approach are expected by autumn 2014. It is expected that more new medicines, including cancer drugs, will be approved for use by the SMC. Scotland also has a £20 million rare-conditions medicines fund.

For Members' information, I have had a paper sitting in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for many months that looks at establishing a similar type of fund and,

in doing so, introducing a relatively small charge for prescriptions once again. Is it right that, particularly when there are those of us who could afford to pay a few pounds each year for a prescription, a small number of people are dying for the want of the drugs? The Members who are all saying to me today, "You need to produce the funding for this", need to tell me who I am going to cut.

11.45 am

For example, I recently approved a new drug for the Celtic gene of cystic fibrosis —

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: This is an important point; I cannot take an intervention at this moment. The drug will ensure that 23 people in Northern Ireland who have cystic fibrosis will live a full life, when years ago, it was anticipated that people with the condition would live to around 20 years of age. That breakthrough took place in Northern Ireland. Consequently, those people will live a full life, but the cost for us each year for those 23 people is just short of £4 million. We took the decision to do that because we care about people with cystic fibrosis. We care about people with heart disease; we care about people with multiple sclerosis, which was raised earlier; and we care about people with arthritis. We have reduced the waiting time for those drugs and many others in Northern Ireland. Where many other conditions are concerned, Northern Ireland is the envy of the United Kingdom. So, let us not put the message out that we deprive people of drugs. England took a decision to set up a cancer drugs fund, and, as a result of that decision, it made cuts elsewhere. I am saying that I can do it without making cuts, but will the House back me? Will the deputy First Minister let us go out to consultation on the issue?

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for giving way. I hear what he says about cuts, and I also hear what he just said about the proposal that he laid before the First Minister and deputy First Minister on, if I heard him right, the introduction of a minimum charge for a prescription. Will he expand on the greater details of his proposal? Has he costed it? Are there details on dealing with the people who he said could afford it? Has he identified the number of people who could afford it? I think that that is the most interesting comment among many that I have heard in recent times from the Minister on this issue and on the potential of introducing prescription charges for this specific issue.

Mr Poots: If we were to reduce the universal prescription charge to 50p, with a maximum of £25 for each year that anybody would have to pay, that would raise us tens of millions of pounds. If we were to go back to the old system, whereby 89% of prescriptions are free, and we were to charge around £3, it would raise in the high millions but not tens of millions. Those are the sort of things that we are looking at. To equate it to the English cancer drugs fund, we would need around £7 million. So, by charging £3 for each prescription for those who were originally paying for prescriptions, you would cover a cancer drugs fund. However, I would want to see it extended beyond cancer drugs to rare disease drugs, as the Scottish Parliament has referred to. That is something that I think the Assembly needs to take a decision on.

Mr McKinney blandly dismissed welfare reform in connection with this issue. It is time that the Assembly recognised that it is not always able to make easy decisions. On behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, we sometimes have to make tough decisions, and we have to explain to the public why we make tough decisions. The Member thinks that a Department that is already under some financial stress and pressure can just find £70 million to pump into welfare reform, which is what we are doing at the minute. At this moment in time, my Department and my trusts are looking at our cost budgets for the incoming year, with £70 million taken out of them to pay for welfare reform. That is not coming from the UK Government; it is coming from the people of Northern Ireland and from the health budget.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that there is a principle at the centre of the cancer drugs fund argument, that the integrity of that argument should be held in that debate and that prescription charges or a welfare reform argument should not be dragged in, as those should be argued separately? Will the Member accept now, given what he said, that he has accepted in full the principle of a cancer drugs fund for Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: There are so many cases that come to me — and cancer is way up there as a priority — that are life and death or are life-changing. We have to make decisions, and we have to do so on the basis of, first, our capacity and, secondly, our financial ability. That is a desperately difficult position to be in, because you can change people's lives, but if you do not have the finance to do it for everybody in every case, at some point you are going to have to make difficult decisions.

Requests to the English cancer drugs fund have to be sought at trust level before submission to the cancer drugs fund committee.

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: I do not have time to give way any more. I apologise to Members.

The related protocol and criteria are very specific about the way in which a drug is to be used, and not every request is approved.

The NHS England cancer drugs fund has a centralised list of drugs that may be accessed. That list is published online and is updated regularly to provide better information on the usage of the scheme. Although the list is useful, it frequently changes to reflect approvals or non-approvals by NICE.

As treatment for cancer is based on the needs of the individual, it is not practical to simply compare a list of drugs used through the NHS England cancer drugs fund at any point in time with those that are the subject of the IFRs that we have Northern Ireland.

The NHS England cancer drugs fund is not a permanent fund. It is expected to be extended to 2016, and it will then be superseded by a new scheme. The value-based scheme will apply in Northern Ireland. That will seek to more clearly and directly link benefits of drugs to the cost.

Consideration of issues, such as those with cancer drugs, comes against the background of the limits on funding available to me, as I have pointed out. However, I am determined to explore every opportunity available to me in delivering increased access to specialist medicines and other interventions.

I have listened to the views and concerns that Members have expressed today, and, even though the IFR process in Northern Ireland supports the vast majority of requests for cancer drugs, I am instructing my Department to evaluate the effectiveness of the IFR process in meeting its objectives. I recognise that other devolved administrations are also considering their approach towards access to specialist drugs, and I am arranging discussions with clinicians to hear directly their views on our processes and how they might be improved. I will announce the terms of reference for that evaluation shortly, and the outcome will be reported to me later this year.

I appeal to House that we move forward together on this issue, that we take a decision

together on this issue and that we take a decision in the best interests of the Northern Ireland public instead of sectional interests. We should not be small-minded or petty about this.

Mr Wells: It is quite clear that there was a degree of unanimity in the debate. There was unanimity about the extent of the problem and that it is growing. We are living longer in Northern Ireland, and, by virtue of that fact alone, more people will develop cancer. There was unanimity on the fact that there is a difference between the availability of cancer drugs in this part of the United Kingdom and in Great Britain.

It is also worth pointing out, as Mr McIlveen stated, that £40 million is spent already on cancer drugs in Northern Ireland. So, it is not a matter of us not taking this issue seriously. That spend has grown considerably in the past three years. Equally, all Members agreed that there is huge public support for the introduction in Northern Ireland of a scheme similar to that in the rest of the UK.

Mr McIlveen brought it home to us, as did others, including Mr Dunne and Mr McKinney, by telling real-life, human stories. Many of us have heard such stories, as I have, as vice-Chair of the Health Committee. There is no doubt that we are dealing with people who are at their lowest and are facing terribly trying medical conditions. It is very difficult to say that they cannot have the same treatment as the rest of the UK.

Maeve McLaughlin, the Chair of the Committee, said that there were 30 drugs available in GB that were not available in Northern Ireland. Interestingly, some Members said that the number was 38 and some said it was 39, so I am not certain which is correct. She added that there should not be a postcode lottery.

Maeve McLaughlin was the first to mention that one in three of us will, at some stage in our lives, contract cancer. There was a variation in the numbers quoted: some quoted 10,000, and she quoted 8,300. The difference comes, I think, from the detection of non-malignant melanoma, which is included in the statistics depending on how you define that. We know that 4,000 people a year die from these conditions and that, crucially, survival rates in Northern Ireland lag behind those of other countries in Europe.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving away. I go back to the Minister's response. I hear often, and it is a good thing, that people are living longer. However, it is not necessarily

having more older people that is upping the number of people with cancer. I assure Members that, in my constituency, a lot of young people are diagnosed with cancer, particularly young women who come forward and go to the cancer bus and are diagnosed with breast cancer. So, it is not necessarily older people who succumb to the disease.

Mr Wells: I know that the Member has concerns about the situation in Strangford, but we have the benefit of statistics provided by Dr Anna Gavin, who runs the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry, and, therefore, we have very good statistics to show that one of the main drivers of increased cancer rates in Northern Ireland is the fact that we are living longer.

Maeve McLaughlin mentioned that, when they apply for treatments and are turned down, people should have clarity as to why they were turned down.

Fearghal McKinney felt that this is a fundamental inequality. He also stated, importantly, that these drugs can increase life expectancy by up to three years, which, of course, if you have cancer, is extremely important. He noted the fact that Scotland had replaced the IFR mechanism and that what we are talking about here, as far as a cancer drugs fund is concerned, is something between £5 million and £6 million. The Minister quite rightly pointed out that that is £5 million or £6 million amongst a host of other competing and very deserving demands for increased treatments. However, the extra amount of money is not as big, perhaps, as people would imagine. Mr McKinney also paid tribute to the work of the voluntary sector.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

Mr McKinney: Does the Member also agree that, although we are dealing fundamentally with people with cancer and life-limiting illnesses, there is, attached to this, a world-class research and development industry that could grow as a result of us continuing to further research these drugs and make them available here? A growth curve is to be had out of this, in jobs and world-class development.

Mr Wells: Yes. Like many other Members, I attended the event last week, which was run by Cancer Focus Northern Ireland, where that very point was made. However, it was also stated at that event that £5 million or £6 million does not necessarily solve the problem because you

have to have the training, extra staff and additional clinical trials. So, it is not simply a matter of throwing a certain amount of money into the system and the problem will be solved.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. Over 1,000 people are engaged in research through Queen's University based at the Belfast City Hospital site, many of them on cancer research. I was told recently that around 1,200 people are on trial drugs that you could not otherwise afford. So, substantial research is taking place in Northern Ireland, and we are very well placed to carry out research.

Mr Wells: That leads me neatly to Mr Beggs's comments. He paid tribute to the work of the cancer centre at Belfast City Hospital and said that we are very much at the cutting-edge of many of these technologies. However, he also added that, at times, within the centre, there is standing room only. That was answered by the Minister, who said that the Altnagelvin facility at Londonderry would alleviate a great deal of that demand. Mr Beggs also asked why there had been, in his opinion, comparatively little progress since the debate on this issue in 2011.

Kieran McCarthy demanded equality of treatment throughout the United Kingdom, and he advocated that we look at the Scottish model, which of course is very recent. It will be interesting to see how that develops. He and Mr McKinney raised the point that it is ironical that some of these drugs are developed and tested in Northern Ireland by our leading pharmaceutical companies but are not available to our constituents.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for giving way. In light of the Minister's comments on moving the situation forward through the Executive, it seems that the Minister can very easily move to active and open consultation without Executive approval, to advance the issue before us.

Mr Wells: First, I would have thought it highly unlikely that any Executive would stand in the way of what the Minister is trying to do and, therefore, getting it through the Executive should be a relatively quick step. Secondly, yes, I support the idea that there is a need, once that happens, for there to be consultation on an issue that affects so many people.

Pam Cameron praised the work of charities and the large amounts that they have raised. She also raised the specific issue of treatment for ovarian cancer. Of course, all Members have been very effectively lobbied by Una Crudden,

who has been a leader in this campaign. She has been demanding, as have others suffering from ovarian cancer, the introduction of Avastin, which is a drug that treats that very painful and life-threatening condition.

12.00 noon

Mickey Brady mentioned the issue of clinical trials, but the Minister has somewhat contradicted his point by outlining how many clinical trials are already ongoing in Northern Ireland.

Gordon Dunne quite rightly praised the campaigning role of Brian Withers, who has lobbied many Members of the Assembly through his own experience of when things can go badly wrong. When access to treatment was denied, he had the drive and got the help to access treatment and support in London, with quite remarkable results.

Seán Rogers asked why the drugs are available in England but not in Northern Ireland and outlined his personal experience. Sadly, many Members of the House have had direct experience of cancer. Their experiences are very useful, but those must have been very difficult times for all concerned. He said that survival rates have doubled in the past 40 years, which is excellent news. In the past week, we crossed another threshold in the United Kingdom: there are now more people alive 10 years after being diagnosed with cancer than those who have passed away. We are now up to 51%. It is tremendous news that all the research that has been going on, even in Northern Ireland, has produced that turnaround. However, we know that for conditions such as liver, pancreatic and lung cancer, the survival rates are stubbornly low. Indeed, in the case of pancreatic cancer, if it is not diagnosed early, the survival rate after five years is only 1%. Seán outlined the importance of early detection.

We have had a very interesting debate, and time is running on. The Minister indicated some of the enormous pressures that he is under. He quoted the drug for cystic fibrosis and the Celtic gene. I will throw another one into the mix: we have had authorisation to introduce the meningitis B vaccine. There is huge public pressure for that. If all our negotiations go smoothly, we are meant to be introducing that in October 2015. However, again, the money has to be found for all these very worthy causes. There is some merit in what the Minister said about some mechanism to produce the funding required to meet those extremely worthy causes. For various reasons, I have had to visit my pharmacy quite a lot over

the past two years, and, personally, I feel very guilty that I can walk in, on my income, and get free prescriptions. I see no reason whatsoever why I should not be asked to pay a service charge. I would be quite happy to pay that if I thought that that money was being used to fund cancer drugs or a drug for arthritis, cystic fibrosis or even meningitis B.

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

Mr Wells: I would happily pay my 50p. You have to look at that realistically.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the difficulties faced by patients obtaining funding for cancer drugs; further notes with concern the varying policy positions throughout the UK and Ireland regarding the accessibility of cancer drugs; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to undertake a review into the practices in Northern Ireland to provide greater clarity for patients trying to obtain funding for cancer drugs.

Protestant Working-class Boys: Underachievement

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

Mr Storey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the issues raised in the report produced by the Community Relations Council regarding the underachievement at GCSE of Protestant working-class boys in receipt of free school meals; notes with concern that this reinforces the conclusions of other similar reports over a number of years; further notes the positive action which the Minister of Education has taken to support other ethnic and minority groups who are underachieving; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline the specific steps his Department is taking to redress this situation and establish a meaningful sectoral body for the controlled sector to enable it to address this issue in the same manner as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, which has been able to tackle underachievement in the maintained sector.

In a sense, this is a case of déjà vu. This is not the first time that a motion of this type has come before the House, and it is disturbing to note that the problem of educational underachievement among Protestant working-class boys in receipt of free school meals continues to be identified as an issue that has not gone away.

In some ways, the conclusions of the Nolan report are not new. Since 2000, reports from a range of agencies have highlighted the problem. Indeed, there has been a range of responses to those reports within and without the Chamber, and many, including those in the Department of Education, initially refused to accept that there was a problem. Others said that the problem had nothing to do with religious baggage and that educational disadvantage knew no barriers, so generic solutions had to be developed. Some said that the current educational structures were the problem, that they needed major surgery and that that would resolve the problem. Others

blamed the state-sponsored 11-plus. Some said that poor leadership and poor teaching in controlled schools were to blame. Those were the issues. Social and religious segregation, poor parenting, low parental and community aspirations for education, paramilitary activity and, of course, the legacy of the Troubles — the scourge on our society that we have seen in recent days — were wheeled out at various stages to account for the problem.

As each report was published, the debate reignited and the firmly held views of a range of participants were restated. Little innovative thinking has been brought to the debate. So may I say at the outset that the purpose of the motion is not to restate the old shibboleths of the past but to acknowledge a number of realities and try to inject some fresh thinking into the debate on a problem that has been around for too long. Strange as it may seem, the purpose is not even to castigate the Minister and his party for their efforts, even though they have held the education portfolio for a long time. I accept that educational underachievement is not just a problem in the Protestant community. As the Minister stated in his press release on the report, in 2011-12, the numbers leaving school with five GCSEs at grade A to C were roughly the same in both communities — 1,151 Protestants and 1,552 Roman Catholics.

Educational underachievement does not recognise religious labels. I know that parties from all sides of the Chamber are concerned to ensure that our children are supported in whatever way they need to be to optimise the opportunities afforded to them by our schooling system. We all know that that will require continuous improvement in the system and generic policies that will improve the future life chances of our children. Of course, different parties will have a differing emphasis on what is important, but I hope that the operation and activities of the Education Committee have proven and shown that it is possible to achieve a consensus on many of the issues in the interests of our children and young people.

I acknowledge that many schools in the Protestant community are doing sterling work and achieving good levels of performance for this group of young people. I pay particular tribute to the work of Ashfield Boys' High School and Belfast Boys' Model School. They achieve outcomes for young Protestant males that demonstrate that this is an issue that can be tackled positively and successfully, even in the most challenging environments of inner-city Belfast, north and east.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He just mentioned the Boys' Model and Ashfield. Recently, I spoke to the principals of both Model schools in my constituency of North Belfast and, earlier today, to the principal of Ashfield, who is an old school friend of mine. The report produced by Paul Nolan in March angered educationalists and principals in secondary and primary schools across the city because he did not speak to the education and library board chief executive, principals or, for example, to the chief executive or chairman of the Greater Shankill Partnership in my area. The report has angered and frustrated those who work in the profession, governors, parents and, more particularly, quite frankly, the young people in those constituencies. Does the Member agree?

Mr Speaker: I say to Members, especially the Member who has the Floor, that he will have no added time. He gives the Floor graciously, but interventions should be short; they should not be statements.

Mr Storey: I am disappointed to hear that that is the case. I want to come on to more elements of the Nolan report. We can accept that underachievement is important. It does not reside in a single community, and there is a need to ensure that generic policies are in place to bring about improvement for all.

What Nolan has done is to remind us, rather starkly, that the performance of the group of young Protestant males in receipt of free school meals is concerning. As the report highlights, it is on a par with Traveller children. No matter how well we are doing from a system and policy improvement perspective, there remains a specific issue that needs to be addressed.

The Minister knows that it is unlikely that I would speak in today's debate without being critical of his performance during his tenure. However, I want to set that in the context of being constructive. From time to time in the House, there is much talk about the importance of equality: the state of being equal, especially in status, rights and opportunity. It seems that that is one of the most important issues of the day. The balance between rights and responsibilities concerns us all as legislators. At the heart of the debate is an inequality. It is an important issue, and the Minister needs to respond to it in that specific context.

In the 1980s, the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights produced a report that highlighted, among other issues, a major problem with the performance of the Catholic maintained sector. Some of the issues

in the report were systematic, but some related specifically to the educational outcomes of the Catholic sector. As a result, the direct rule Minister of the day established the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to provide additional support to the Catholic sector and to resolve the problem. The sector still had to access all the services of the boards, but, since 1989, millions of pounds have been given to the sector via the CCMS to bring about improvement. When you look at how the sector now performs, the result of that initiative is clear in the Nolan report. Recently, the Education Committee conducted an inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). I was impressed by the officers from the CCMS, who described how they were able to give additional support to their sector to prepare for and deal with inspections. They received help from the boards, but, in addition, they had support from CCMS staff, who were able to focus on the needs of a school.

When the integrated sector and the Irish-medium sector were developing, they were given protection in legislation, which put a statutory obligation on the Department to promote and facilitate those sectors. Some may argue about whether the Department has been supportive, but it is clear that the sectors have been aided by that protection. When an issue with the Travelling community was highlighted some years ago, the previous Minister instigated and launched a working party, which set up a regional service for Travellers to deal with that specific issue. From an equality point of view, those were positive actions. They did not replace the generic policies or resources of the system but were additional measures to deal with a specific problem. We require the same actions to tackle this problem.

The problem is further compounded by the way in which the education structures have developed. We have three bodies in the system that are avowedly partisan in their promotion of a particular brand of education. When I met representatives of the integrated sector, for example, they openly talked about their vision for their brand of schools, and they promoted those schools. Indeed, they launched a document in this Building last week. The same is true of the Catholic and Irish-medium sectors. That is not the case when it comes to the way in which the education and library boards protect, promote and facilitate the controlled sector.

There is much more that we could say. Unfortunately, my time is coming to an end, but much more needs to be said about this issue.

The plea to the Minister today is this: for the controlled sector, let us have the establishment of a meaningful body — not a paper exercise, a diversion or something seen as being on the outside — with teeth to make sure that it has the confidence of its community to provide for working-class Protestant boys.

I understand that —

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

Mr Storey: — in May and June, the three main Protestant Churches will debate the issue at their synods and general assemblies.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Storey: The issue is of the utmost importance, and the Minister needs to address it.

12.15 pm

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Community Relations Council" and insert:

"which once again sets out the close correlation between socio-economic background and exam success; further notes that the most significant divisions in education are based on gender and class and that it is the interplay between these which drives inequality; calls on the Minister of Education to work with all concerned to abolish the inequities in the education system designed to produce further inequality and to continue to take measures for all those who are underachieving regardless of class, creed or ethnic background; and further calls on the Minister of Education to set out the further steps his Department can take, including the establishment of a meaningful sectoral support body for the controlled sector as set out in the Education Bill, to support Protestant working-class boys who are not achieving their full potential."

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I rise, as a member of the Education Committee, in support of the amendment. The amendment clearly sets out the close correlation between socio-economic background and exam success. It notes that the most significant divisions in education are based on gender and class and that it is that interplay that drives inequality. I agree with the proposer of the

motion that inequality and equality are central to this debate. The amendment calls for a meaningful sectoral support body for the controlled sector, as in the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), to support Protestant working-class boys who are not achieving their full potential.

Whilst maintained secondary schools receive more funding due to pupil numbers, controlled secondary schools receive more than maintained secondary schools in the current year. In September 2012, a working group was set up to establish a sectoral support body. We see a plethora of additional funding being made available to target underachievement through frameworks such as Delivering Social Change and area learning communities. A key area of the common funding scheme is targeting social need through the allocation of the additional £10 million of funding that has been agreed.

It is with interest that I note that the DUP is now beginning to talk about the needs of the controlled sector. Although I welcome that, it is a change of approach. Throughout all the years of the ESA negotiations, the DUP was interested only in representing the role of the grammar sector.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. If the Member wants to put that as a factual statement, I am quite happy to provide to the House information to show that it is neither true nor warranted. It is a slant on the truth, which is nothing new from the party opposite.

Mr Speaker: The Member has it on the record. Let us move on.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for his intervention and say this to him: go ahead with that proposal. It is worth noting that, in the debate in the Chamber on 15 October 2012, only one Member from the opposite Benches mentioned Protestant working-class boys; that is on the record now. Members from the opposite Benches were more interested in the Bill's Irish language provisions than what it would do to raise educational attainment for Protestant working-class boys.

When the Minister announced his plans to reform the schools funding formula to target the additional support that is required by those in greatest need, including Protestant working-class boys, he was condemned by the DUP. The Education Bill provided for a sectoral body for the controlled sector. There is reference to a representational and advocacy role; working

with schools in the sector to develop and maintain the collective ethos of the sector; and working with the ESA to raise educational standards. In fact, it was up and running in preparation for the introduction of the ESA. If the DUP wants to know why there is no sectoral body, the answer is simple: they have failed to deliver on the ESA.

Nevertheless, I am glad that the DUP is finally beginning to accept the link between social disadvantage and poor educational attainment and that it must be broken in whatever community it exists. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: The peace monitoring report highlighted the huge gaps and disparity in educational outcomes amongst different groups of young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Its findings should come as no surprise. Our education system continues to fail too many people. It is a fact that of a cohort of 1,151 Protestant young people entitled to free school meals who left school in 2011-12, 853 did not attain the benchmark of five or more GCSEs at grade A to C. That represents 74.1% of that cohort. The figure was 61.5% of the Catholic group.

So, while we have a system that works for some and not for all and which still tells children at 11 that they are a failure, it will continue to see generations of young people looking at a cycle of deprivation. The proposals of social and economic selection must stop, and the proponents of such a scheme must start accepting responsibility for all its outcomes, especially the outcomes for working-class children.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate today. I support the motion as amended. The Community Relations Council's report unearthed educational underachievement, and it is why it is vital to heed the findings and to collectively learn from them and collectively do something about them.

We have experienced this before. As has been said in the debate, around 30% of pupils with free school meal entitlement achieved five GCSEs at grades A to C, including English and maths. The amendment is quite right to say that there are inequalities at play, and socio-economic background is one of the strongest predictors of academic performance. As we know, there are a range of other indications, such as parental qualifications, the home learning environment, high levels of

absenteeism and issues around male literacy. As Mr Storey mentioned, there are other factors at play such as low aspiration, legacy issues and mental illness, among others.

There is also clear evidence that early intervention can make a big difference. Intervening at a young age has a great effect on educational outcomes, and this is one area that we believe that the Minister should be actively involved in and trying to promote in order to stem problems before they become bigger.

Classroom teaching is another area for possible improvement to address issues around socio-economic inequalities and differences. Classroom teaching has the biggest impact on student outcomes, but a chief inspector's report recently pointed out that, in 60% of post-primary lessons, the quality of teaching was not very good or better.

We want to know whether the Minister is serious about tackling this issue. We cannot agree with the amendment. There is concern that broadening the scope of the original motion is avoiding the issue, so I throw down a challenge to the Minister. Recently, he made announcements around a number of schools in south Belfast, including Knockbreda and Newtownbreda. Those two schools recently had plenty of parents who turned up for meetings to discuss the plans that the Minister has had. In those meetings, there was real energy about wanting improvement in their schools and wanting to better issues for their pupils.

There is an opportunity. If you like, the Minister has a new sheet. I know that there is a legal challenge, but, from the Minister's perspective, there is a new sheet. There is room for him to really do something based on what the amendment is talking about to do with socio-economic background and inequalities.

What is the Minister going to do about liaising with other Departments and improving the potential outcome for students and parents in those areas? Is he liaising with the Health Department to deal with issues around mental illness? Is he liaising with other Departments around any of the issues that are affecting the better outcomes? Those are issues around low aspiration and legacy, for example.

There is a real opportunity in terms of Newtownbreda and Knockbreda for the Minister to say that the amalgamated school will be a centre of excellence and that he will tackle it. Of course, he can tackle it through the setting up of separate bodies, and Ms McLaughlin

referred to her perspective of the ESA guidelines, and Mr Storey referred to his perspective. There is an opportunity here in that there are two schools that he says are underperforming and which he says could perform better. They are in areas that need wider issues addressed. Tell us what the evidence is. I have seen some of the commonly asked questions that the board put forward about those two schools. I do not see in that the commonly asked questions about what the Minister is doing to address, in the widest possible way, in a cross-departmental way, in a way that will get to the heart of these issues and in a way —

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way, but does he also accept that aligned to that type of approach is the necessity for a body to have the power to work on behalf of the controlled sector? As the South Eastern Education and Library Board has clearly demonstrated, that has not been the case. Until recently, the two boards were not even talking about the issue with the schools that the Member refers to.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Member. Whatever body we end up with will be a body that we will end up with, or we will not end up with one. However, there is an opportunity to put a down payment on what we are talking about here, which is the underachievement in particular communities. The Minister can outline to us today exactly what he is doing with those two schools and how he is going to put this, first and foremost, at top of the page as headline news that says, "I am going to tackle this issue, and I am going to tackle this issue with these schools".

I appreciate that there is a difficulty between parties and that there are bureaucratic difficulties in achieving the body. However, there is no difficulty with a Department relating to other Departments so that the Minister can say how he is going to put at the top, first and foremost, achieving the best outcome for these pupils and persuading the parents at those schools, who want to see the better outcome, that he is going to put in parenting and sporting facilities and things that will directly address and empower the people in the communities —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McKinney: — surrounding the schools by saying that he will do everything that he can to achieve what he says he wants to.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the chance to speak on the motion. However, it is not just about the failure of Protestant working-class boys — some of them, as we must not blame them all. The motion is about the failure of this institution and, in particular, the two main parties to achieve anything for the Protestant working-class boys.

We must remember today to congratulate all those schools, teachers and pupils who work so hard and who achieve and come out with quite an excellent education. However, there is nothing new in this report or in what we are being told today. It is what has existed for many years. What is lacking is action. We have plenty of strategies and excellent advice, but we seem to have a complete or continual lack of imagination about how to make things happen. That stems right back to the two parties' failure to make the Belfast Agreement work and to come up with consensus.

The failure that the motion highlights also stems from the lack of success of us here. If we had been allowed to have our amendment today, I could have gone into much more detail about the actions that could be taken.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way for clarification on one point?

Mr Kinahan: I will give way.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. He claimed not that many weeks ago that ESA not being progressed was a victory for his party. How can he then condemn us for doing something that he believes should have happened in the first place? Who got it right?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. I am not happy at having achieved stopping anything. However, had the two parties worked together and come up with an agreed process that would have allowed us to go forward to have an ESA that worked while not creating an enormous body that was doomed to fail and that was going to get rid of the grammar and voluntary sector, it is sad that I had to stop things happening.

I will go back to my main point that what we need is action. I agree with the motion that we

need to take specific steps, particularly setting up a sectoral body for the controlled schools. It is good to see both parties now working and agreeing on that. However, we also need sectoral bodies for all the other sectors: the Governing Bodies Association, the Irish and the integrated. We have got to get to a system that is even for everybody here so that everybody can thrive.

We need a new approach. We need to stop blaming the grammar schools, the voluntary schools and selection. We need to sit down and work together and find a joint way forward. We have to move away from an insular approach in places. The other day I went to the West Belfast Partnership education conference. It was fantastic, with terrific hard work, but, once again, we were concentrating on one side of the coin. We need to work it for everybody together — for Protestant and Catholic Children.

12.30 pm

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I have already given way once, and I know that we are running tight on time, so I will carry on, thank you.

We need to move away from the dumbing down of education, which the amendment focuses on. A policy such as the entitlement framework seems excellent in one way, but it is so large and places so many different subjects in front of students that you cannot focus on what a student needs to do to get them the job afterwards and stop us looking at underachievement.

Too often we concentrate on GCSEs and A levels, when, in fact, it is the whole value-added approach that we must focus on. If we look at other countries, we will see that, in America, they have turnaround programmes. You can learn from them, just as we do when we look at Finland and others. We need to look for actions, not strategies. We need to have all of the Departments working together at the highest level and all in tune with where we are going, which goes back to my point about consensus and everyone working together.

We must focus on urging, encouraging and even impelling everybody to work together at local level, so I am going to focus on action zones or turnaround zones. We should concentrate on grouping the schools and communities together as well as the parents, the social and sporting clubs, the lodges, the

community groups, and the Churches and their community groups. Pull them all together, but find an inspirational leader or Tsar. Find someone who, in that area, can pull them all together, focus on the pupils there, nurture and find out what is failing. That is how we will find our way forward.

We need a total picture. You need to let the schools bid for their money. The Ulster Unionist Party has put forward the pupil premium. At the moment the common funding is being changed. It is taking money off one school for another. That is not the way forward. We need to speak more to the schools on the ground and have the schools, the boards and the Departments all looking at what is needed on the ground in those action zones and turnaround zones and actually putting events on the ground that help the children.

We should take on board the views of Professors Borooah and Knox and get schools to work together, so that it is not just shared education — which, at the moment, we seem to do very little on — but sharing both the types of school and the different religions.

There is plenty that we can do. I do not have enough time, but with today's motion, we need to concentrate on proper resourcing and proper working together, both at the Department and on the ground, and on really making sure that we have the excellence in education that everyone in this room wants.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1, 3 and 13 have been withdrawn. I call Mr Jonathan Craig, who is not in his place. Therefore, I will move on. I call Ms Rosaleen McCorley, who is not in her place. I call Mr Barry McElduff, who is not in his place. I call Mrs Judith Cochrane, who is not in her place. I call Mr George Robinson, who is in his place.

Skills: North-west Workforce

7. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans are in place to ensure that the workforce in the north-west will have the skillset required by future investors. (AQO 6049/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I thank the Member for his question and his attendance to ask it.

My Department devotes considerable resources to developing relationships with current and potential employers in the north-west and to meeting their skill needs, both short and long term. My Department has funded a liaison officer for employment and skills in Derry. A wide range of interfaces is available, helping businesses and individuals to access support to develop their skills. The Careers Service, jobs and benefits offices and the Skills Solutions Service act in various ways as portals to skills development. North West Regional College and the University of Ulster are focused on providing businesses with skilled people ready to avail themselves of employment opportunities.

The practical outworking of that approach is seen, for example, in the response to the local information and communication technology (ICT) sector's demand for new talent. Recently, I announced a pilot ICT apprenticeship scheme to recruit individuals into that growing sector in the north-west. That development seeks to build on the positive results from a similar project in Belfast, which has seen 74 ICT apprentices recruited. At present, my Department has a commitment from seven organisations, including Seagate, 360

Production and Alleycats, to take on a total of 11 apprentices.

Working with Invest NI, the Assured Skills programme is designed to attract foreign direct investment companies to Northern Ireland by assuring them that the skills they need are available. Assured Skills support is also available to encourage existing companies considering expansion.

In September 2014, the software professional course will be offered to a second cohort in the north-west. That is a Northern Ireland-wide initiative, which will see 250 non-ICT graduates upskilled to allow them to work proficiently in ICT roles.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer. Will he undertake to ensure that emphasis is placed on emerging technologies, as that would be a growing and valuable asset for students in the future labour market, particularly those in the north-west, where we have lost so many jobs in the past few years?

Dr Farry: I very much endorse the comments that the Member makes. We are well aware of the potential for growth in the Northern Ireland economy as a whole over the coming decade. We are equally aware that there is potential in a number of key sectors, including the ICT sector. Already, the north-west has a presence in that regard. Seagate is a major employer in that part of the world, and, indeed, a major asset to Northern Ireland, and one that is seeking to further entrench its position in our economy and to develop its research and development capacity. There are other companies as well.

It is important that our colleges and universities respond to the challenge and that we invest heavily in additional places to facilitate that. I am keen to highlight the importance of higher level apprenticeships as a means to addressing the needs of the ICT sector. That is why I was so keen to make reference to the fact that we are developing a pilot specifically in the north-west.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What opportunities does the Minister see for retraining employees at the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) offices in Coleraine?

Dr Farry: First of all, there is the potential for the reallocation of those staff elsewhere in the public sector. Efforts are under way, outwith my own direct responsibilities, in that regard.

More generally, we will always seek to respond to the needs of individuals and employers. We will be mindful, in the event of people being made redundant, of how we can facilitate them when it comes to retraining. Obviously we want to take note of opportunities that exist elsewhere in the economy and to give good careers advice to see how those skills can be transferred and what additional programmes, if appropriate, can be put in place to help people in that situation.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister outline the tracking system in place to keep a record of those who are not in employment, training or education? What progress is being made to develop a rural university network for the west, and can the South West College maybe help with that?

Dr Farry: Those two questions are probably slightly off topic. Nonetheless, with regard to the tracking system for NEETs, we are developing a unique learner number that, in the first instance, will allow individuals to be better tracked in programmes that my Department currently offers. In due course, we want to see that applied right across the education system, including our schools. In that way, we will be able to much better map progression for our young people.

With reference to the Member's second point about a rural university, as he described it, one of the projects within the higher education strategy — project 10 — is designed to facilitate a university centre within the further education (FE) offering across Northern Ireland. Both the South West College and the Southern Regional College have expressed interest in that regard, and my officials are in discussions with them to see how we can develop a model that will provide more ready access to university courses in rural settings in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: Future investors in the north-west will be certainly focused around Project Kelvin and the new enterprise zone in Coleraine. Will the Minister's Department be able to react quickly enough to ensure that the skill set is in place for future young people to meet those job demands?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. There is always a trade-off to be struck between what you would term speculative training in anticipation of jobs that may be created in due course and responding to situations as we find them. If we jump too early and sometimes get it wrong, there is always the danger of criticism from MLAs and, indeed, the Audit Office in relation to the inefficient use of

public resources. If we leave things too late, there is always the danger of missing out on opportunities or not fully developing opportunities that may arise.

Nonetheless, we are very mindful that the ICT sector is a sure bet in that regard. We have seen evidence of significant growth in the past number of years, and the projections are that that is set to grow even faster over the coming years, particularly in the context of a lower level of corporation tax. That is why we are placing such emphasis on growing the number of university places, developing a higher level of apprenticeships in ICT and the provision of the conversion courses for non-IT graduates to transfer and to have very lucrative careers in a very important sector for our economy.

Education and Skills

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on his recent meeting with the Minister for Education and Skills. (AQO 6050/11-15)

Dr Farry: During our most recent meeting, I discussed with Minister Quinn a number of areas where there could be greater cross-border collaboration. We discussed the issue of student flows and, whilst recognising that a growth in student mobility in general is beneficial, we noted that there are current imbalances that need to be addressed. My officials are currently working with colleagues in the South on a study researching student flows.

It was agreed that there is a particular issue with further education in the Derry and Donegal area that requires particular attention. It would appear that a lack of provision at certain levels in Donegal may be a contributing factor. We agreed that my officials will collate and share relevant information with their counterparts in the Department of Education and Skills as a first step and will explore ways to address the imbalance, including looking at alternative funding opportunities.

Work to address potential barriers to higher education student mobility in both directions is being taken forward, and a system is now in place to address the financial needs of students.

The issue of A-level equivalences is a contributing factor to the low number of Northern Ireland students considering higher education in the South. The Irish Universities Association continues to consider the position at a strategic level. However, a number of

universities are considering interim measures to attract Northern Ireland students. Ruairi Quinn and I have agreed that an interim paper on cross-border further education issues should be prepared for consideration by Ministers in a North/South ministerial context in June.

I will continue to meet Minister Quinn to discuss progress, and my officials will continue to work closely with our counterparts in the South on those and other cross-border issues.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat arís, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. Has he given any consideration to, or made any assessment of, the opportunities presented by the McAleese scholarships at Dublin City University (DCU) to encourage more students from the North to travel to the South for further education?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I very much welcome the initiative of the McAleese scholarships. In the absence of a formal policy approach across the board from the Irish Universities Association, individual universities are taking action to progress the issue. I think that a number of them are conscious that they have very few students from Northern Ireland and that, in particular, the existing students tend to be concentrated in Dublin. By implication, some of the other universities have very small numbers of students from Northern Ireland. So the McAleese scholarships are an important initiative. They also send a wider signal to the rest of the sector and reflect some of the good work happening at Trinity and university college Galway.

Mr Campbell: As the economies in both countries, Northern Ireland and the Republic, pick up at different levels, what communication and discussion will the Minister have with his counterpart in the Irish Republic so that, if a particular skill set or skill base is here but the jobs are in, for example, the greater Dublin area, more advantage can be taken of that skills base, even though the employment might be required in the Republic?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. We have discussed how we can utilise existing skills bases and develop further specialisms on a cross-border or all-island basis to facilitate the creation of jobs in both jurisdictions. We are living in a fast-changing economic situation. We know that the level of development and cooperation on those matters across the border is probably seriously underdeveloped. The same applies to, for example, research, where

there is considerable potential for collaboration between Northern and Southern universities.

I am hopeful that our groundbreaking announcement in December about North/South cooperation on research will provide us with a platform. We also need to look proactively at Horizon 2020. Having a good foundation for collaboration is important in accessing bids. There is a lot that we can do to the benefit of each of our economies through collaboration on skills and research.

Mr Kinahan: In light of what the Minister just told us, what grouping of people does he take with him to these meetings? How many from the Department of Education does that include? How often do you meet and link with the Minister so that rather than just you talking to the Education and Skills Minister, our Education Minister is included?

Dr Farry: As the Member will appreciate, my Department is not part of the formal North/South ministerial structures. There is a wider debate to be had on those, and that has been out there for quite some time. Regardless of the particular structures, I am more than happy to collaborate further on a North/South and bilateral basis with my colleague. Ministerial meetings happen frequently. Officials, including those at senior level, also meet frequently. I compare notes with my colleague the Minister of Education, John O'Dowd. Indeed, the last meeting that we had with Ruairi Quinn coincided with a more formal meeting between John O'Dowd and Ruairi Quinn, so we are all in the same building at the same time.

2.15 pm

Consultants: DEL Spend

9. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the cost of consultants used by his Department since May 2011. (AQO 6051/11-15)

Dr Farry: Between May 2011 and 31 December 2013, my Department and its non-departmental public bodies spent a total of £420,000 on consultancy fees. This level of expenditure is approximately 0.02% of the Department's annual resource budget. Of this, 57% — £240,000 — relates to expenditure by the Department, and 43% — £179,000 — relates to expenditure incurred by the non-departmental public bodies.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra chuimsitheach sin. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response and for the percentages. What is he doing to limit that cost, given future departmental expenditure limits being imposed?

Dr Farry: The Member is probably aware that, Executive-wide, protocols have been in place for a number of months, if not longer, for the authorisation of consultancies, so there are more checks and balances. Consulting needs to be considered on its own merits in each case. At times, the use of consultants can be of benefit to ensure that we have a much more robust policymaking foundation.

If we get policymaking right, that will ensure, down the line, that we are more efficient in the use of other resources, and the public stand to benefit from that. At times, I appreciate that people can be cynical about the use of consultancy. However, if people step back and look at individual cases, they will see that it makes a real difference to outcomes.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answers to date. Does he take a view as to whether it is better to employ external consultants on a tender basis, or would he prefer a contractual relationship of the nature that the Strategic Investment Board has recently developed with its external consultants?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I suspect that he is trying to lead me in a certain direction. Let me address the question in this way: a decision has to be made in a particular area as to what is the most appropriate means by which one would engage consultants. Normally, it is through a tender process. Occasionally, if a particular set of expertise has been identified, there may be strong reasons for engaging in a single tender action. It is very much horses for courses, and it is incumbent on senior departmental officials and, ultimately, Ministers, to ensure that proper consideration is given to value for money and that there is a strong business case and rationale for the employment of consultants.

Autism: Jobs/Project ABLE

10. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what support his Department offers young people diagnosed with autism who are entering the job market. (AQO 6052/11-15)

12. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of his Department's commitment to the implementation of the Northern Ireland autism strategy, what assurances he can give that his Department will urgently address the critical need for a regional roll-out of the Autism Building Links to Employment service. (AQO 6054/11-15)

Dr Farry: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I wish to group questions 10 and 12 and request an additional minute to answer.

My Department provides a range of programmes, services, advice and guidance to assist people with a full range of disabilities, including young people who are diagnosed with autism. The Careers Service has partnership agreements in place with post-primary schools, including special schools. Those agreements allow careers advisers, in consultation with schools, the opportunity to help people to realise their career aspirations and to achieve their full potential in education, training and employment. This includes those with autism.

The Department's Training for Success programme is one option that is considered by a careers adviser, at this stage, but only after parental or guardian consent. Should this be the case, a young person will be referred to a disability support provider. This process aims to ensure that specific learning and development support needs are identified and put in place as soon as possible after commencement of training.

My Department's disability employment service also has a number of specialist disability employment programmes, including Work Connect, Access to Work and Workable. Through those programmes, and in conjunction with the local disability sector, the Department provides valuable support to people with autism who are looking to find and retain employment. The programmes are also a means to encourage employers to provide opportunities for people with autism to engage in work.

Work Connect and Workable are delivered by a strong consortium of disability organisations: Supported Employment Solutions. That includes the Orchardville Society and NOW, two local organisations that specialise in helping and supporting people with autism and Asperger's syndrome. Those two organisations have worked in partnership to deliver Project ABLE — the autism building links to employment initiative — which was funded through the Big Lottery Fund until this year. My

officials have good working relationships with the respective organisations.

Through its European unit and the Disability Employment Service, my Department provides financial support to enable both organisations to deliver similar projects under the auspices of the European social fund. With the next call for European social fund applications due in autumn 2014, I am confident that my Department will continue to work with and support those organisations and others who deliver employment services to people with disabilities, including those who specialise in helping people with autism to progress towards and to move into the world of work.

I hope that my Department's financial commitments will be augmented with matched funding from other public bodies, as this must be a collective effort on behalf of all those who have signed up to the autism strategy. We are also devising a disability employment strategy for Northern Ireland, which we will consult on later in the year.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the detailed response to my question. In light of the fact that, as is generally known, a person with a learning disability is four times less likely to secure work in Northern Ireland, what efforts are being made or what motivation is being given to the parents of children with autism in order that they can assist them to prepare for the workplace?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and acknowledge his long-standing interest in campaigning in this area. First, it is important that we recognise the role of parents as key advisers in future decision making. Careers advice, particularly for those who are making transitions, is available. It is something that we are further reviewing as part of the wider careers review that we launched at the end of March this year.

It is also important that we encourage employers to offer up opportunities for people with a range of disabilities. It is important to stress that many people with disabilities can play a full and active role in the workplace. In particular, many people with autism can play an enhanced role in the workplace. They often bring enhanced employability skills through things such as attention to detail, reliability, punctuality and a tight attention to their work. A lot of testimonials from employers have stressed the real added value that has been found in employing people with autism. It is important that that message be passed on among employers in Northern Ireland and that we encourage more of them to step forward.

That will be one of the key components of the forthcoming disability employment strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mrs Pam Cameron would have been called to ask a supplementary question, but she is not her place. I call Mr Sammy Douglas.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He will be aware of the difficulties that young people with autism in particular experience when they leave school in trying to get a job. Can the Minister give us an update on the percentage of young people who are unemployed who have autism or Asperger's syndrome? Secondly, would he be willing to visit groups in east Belfast that work with those young people?

Dr Farry: I cannot give the Member a precise figure off the top of my head, although people will be aware of the general profile of autism among young people in general, and we can take it as read that that figure will be higher among the subsection of those young people who are unemployed. That highlights the importance of work in this area in order that we can ensure that we are offering opportunities and fully utilising the skills of those young people.

As for activity in east Belfast, I highlight the new intervention from Specialisterne NI, which was launched in the Skainos Centre on 9 April. It works with young people to create opportunities in the ICT sector, which is one area where people with autism have a particular aptitude and ability to provide real added value to the world of work.

A number of other projects and organisations that I previously mentioned also work in east Belfast as well as other places in Northern Ireland, so we have a good footprint in the community and voluntary sector. What is important is that they come forward with good projects and, in turn, that the Government look to support them into the future.

Mr Swann: In his answer, the Minister mentioned the use of the European social fund. Has his Department anything in place should it fail to be successful in that funding or if it should be in a position in which it could not apply to the European social fund, maybe if we were no longer a part of Europe?

Dr Farry: I would hate to think that we would not be part of Europe and would lose the advantage that accrues to us from access to the European social fund alongside CAP, a host

of other structural funds and the competitive funds; the list goes on and on. When it comes to the specifics, however, it is important that organisations give proper attention to their bids for the European social fund. It is a competitive process, and organisations will be scored against one another for what is a fixed budget. Nevertheless, that budget will, at the very least, be at the same scale as in previous rounds, so there will be a wealth of opportunities.

In the event that an organisation is unsuccessful, there will be other calls under different programmes. For example, we have had a call for the collaboration and innovation fund under Pathways to Success, the Executive's NEETs strategy. A number of organisations that are maybe funded for one project under the European social fund will have sought funds under that programme as well, so there are other funding sources. For sure, the European social fund is a major commitment from the European Union to Northern Ireland which, in turn, allows us to create a wealth of opportunities for people, whether in apprenticeships, youth training or through the social inclusion agenda.

KPL Contracts: DEL Support

11. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the support his Department has offered to staff at KPL Contracts following the recent closure of the company. (AQO 6053/11-15)

Dr Farry: I am saddened by this closure and its impact on the employees of KPL. In order to support them at this time, my officials provided a redundancy advice service clinic on 26 February in partnership with a range of organisations, including the Social Security Agency, Invest NI, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Citizens Advice and the Careers Service, to offer a tailored package of support. Advice has been given on alternative job opportunities, mentoring, access to training courses, business start-ups and careers advice, as well as a range of other issues such as benefits and taxation. In response to feedback from KPL employees who attended the clinic, my officials also ran a job club on 16 April in Dungiven to provide more intensive support and information to individuals in a small group setting.

Through my Department's redundancy payments service, I am committed to providing an efficient, high-quality redundancy service to KPL staff who have an entitlement to statutory redundancy and who meet the eligibility criteria

for payment from the national insurance fund's statutory guarantee scheme. My officials are processing 160 redundancy applications from former KPL employees. Redundancy payments were issued to 126 former KPL employees on 25 April.

Finally, I assure you that my staff in the local jobs and benefits network will continue to deliver one-to-one support to those impacted. This includes a range of services, including assistance with job searching, writing CVs, completion of job application forms, preparation for interviews, and careers guidance or financial assistance with interview costs where necessary. Employees will also be offered full access to our programmes, including Steps to Work and the youth employment scheme.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer and for the assistance that he has given to KPL. Does he accept that, in many cases, those worst impacted by these recent closures, including at KPL, are not the staff but the subcontractors, who stand to lose the most?

Dr Farry: I agree with the Member's comments. Whether we are talking about this case or other similar tragic cases across Northern Ireland in recent months, there is a supply chain through which the effects filter down. Many of the services that we offer to the main employer are also available to other employees who find themselves in that situation. Anyone can call in, for example, to their local jobs and benefits office to have a discussion with a careers adviser, and we will signpost them to other support where necessary.

In particular, I encourage people who find themselves in a redundancy situation to think carefully about their further options.

I am pleased that a number of people who were made redundant from KPL have found alternative employment. That shows the effectiveness at times of the clinics that we provided. In other cases, people will need to consider opportunities for retraining. Our FE sector is there as a ready resource in that regard, and good careers advice will signpost people to the most appropriate intervention.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We will now move on to topical questions.

Zero-hours Contracts

1. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the consultation on zero-hours contracts in Northern Ireland. (AQT 1061/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I have made it clear in both the Assembly and the Committee that I am committed to undertaking a public consultation on the potential regulation of zero-hours contracts in Northern Ireland. It is my intention that that consultation will be released before the summer recess. In doing so, we are not seeking to necessarily ban zero-hours contracts, in that we recognise that they can offer flexibility for employers and a number of employees. However, there is, at the same time, significant concern about their use and, moreover, their abuse, and there may be a strong case for better regulation. The consultation will seek to bottom out those considerations.

It may be interesting to note that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in Great Britain recently concluded its consultation on a number of aspects of zero-hours contracts. It received 37,000 responses, which gives an indication of the interest in the topic.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister. Continuing with the theme of consultation, key research was published last week in Britain. Will you comment on that and on the effects that it will have on the consultation that you will undertake here?

Dr Farry: The research that was published last week gave some figures for and estimates of the number of zero-hours contracts that are being deployed. It estimated that there were about 1.4 million live contracts, but that does not count those zero-hours contracts that may be dormant. That was a higher figure than that previously provided by either the labour force survey or the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, which used different methodologies.

We can extrapolate from those figures to Northern Ireland, and, working on the basis of around 4% of employees being on zero-hours contracts, we can see that it equates to around 28,000 contracts here. Given that we are talking about an extrapolation, that figure may be higher, but it is more likely to be less, given the different structure of our economy.

I am committed to taking forward research that is specific to Northern Ireland, because it is important that we quantify exactly what is going on in our economy. That will be a critical element of any future policy development in the area.

We also know from the research in Great Britain that zero-hours contracts tend to be more concentrated in some sectors than others, with health and social care being one such sector and tourism and hospitality another. We also know that zero-hours contracts tend to impact more on part-time workers, women and young people aged between 16 and 24. Those will all be considerations that we will want to confirm for Northern Ireland and factor in to future policy development.

Pound in Your Pocket Survey

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the recent pound in your pocket survey carried out by NUS-USI, which revealed that almost one in five students is, due to financial difficulties, on the brink of dropping out of university. (AQT 1063/11-15)

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for raising that. At times, a lot of the public debate on student finance has focused on tuition fees. Although student debt is an important consideration in whether people will seek to progress to higher education — indeed, the Executive and the Assembly were right to freeze tuition fees for local students — we have to take into account the reality of how students live on a day-to-day basis.

We have maintenance support in the form of loans and grants, but it is clear from the survey that there are students who are struggling in that way. Hardship funds are available in universities, and students can avail themselves of those in some circumstances. Certainly, any students who find themselves in extreme situations should talk to their universities in that regard.

One issue that we should consider as part of the current careers review is how we could better pass on lessons on sound money management to young people while they are still at school. That may well be part of the wider careers advice that they receive. We can consider a number of different avenues. However, to increase the level of maintenance support, which I do recognise as an option, would involve further commitment of resources. That has to be taken in the round against other

potential expenditure and costs that the Executive may well face over the coming months and years.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. He has responded, at least in part, to my supplementary question. The students' unions have asked the Assembly to step up the levels of support that we give to students. The Minister has referred to some aspects of that support. Is he in a position to elaborate further on the level of support that is being given or being considered? Might he give a more considered and formal response to the students' unions on the report?

Dr Farry: I attended the NUS-USI conference last week when that report was formally published. The Department is happy to engage with NUS-USI as a central organisation or with individual students' unions to discuss those issues in greater detail. The mechanism for taking that forward is that we have commenced a review of student finance in the Department. I want to stress that it will not stretch to the issue of tuition fees, which I regard as being a settled point of policy across all the main parties in the Chamber. However, we are prepared to look at issues around levels of maintenance support. Again, I stress that, if we feel that there is a case for increasing those levels, we will have to make a bid to the Executive for additional resources. That will have to be taken in the round by the Executive against all other pressures.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Alastair Ross is not in his place to ask question 4.

Skills: Technical/Engineering/Programming

5. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he accepts that we need to embed greater technical, engineering and computer programming skills far earlier for all in the current education process, given that, interestingly, today, we are debating the underachievement of Protestant working-class boys. (AQT 1065/11-15)

Dr Farry: I very much agree with the Member. It is important that we have a strong pipeline of young people coming forward with skills that are relevant to today's world of work. That includes employability skills and the very particular technical skills that are required to fulfil a number of jobs. My Department is looking at a number of interventions, including

the review of apprenticeships. We also have a parallel review of youth training, which we want to be aligned to the needs of the economy as well. We have also initiated, with the Department of Education, a joint review of careers. It is important that we have a system that is very much tied to the needs of the labour market.

However, we need to drill deeper and look at the reasons why certain people underachieve in the education system. That is why it is important that we have positive role models. It is important that we give a sense of purpose as to why people would want to invest in certain skills and the trajectory of their employment prospects. To put that in practical terms, for example, if someone wants to work as a mechanic, it is important that they attain their GCSE in maths in order that they can function effectively in that scenario. In an abstract sense, a young person may not understand the purpose of maths. However, if they have an interest in cars and wish to be a mechanic, we can create a virtual look back so that they understand the reasons for doing that.

How we encompass all of that is through an overarching 14-19 strategy between my Department and the Department of Education. At present, it is under discussion with the Minister of Education.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his positive response. I am very glad to hear that he agrees with me for the most part. Would he then accept that dividing education and skills into two Departments is a major impediment to developing young people for their future employment?

Dr Farry: I do not think that that necessarily follows. So, I will disappoint the Member in that we have probably reached the limit of where we are going to agree on that particular point. However, it is important that we look to the future and appreciate that there may well be some reform of Departments in due course. We regard further education and higher education as being fundamental drivers of the economy ideally sitting in a wider Department of the economy that properly integrates skills and research with our approach to developing business and attracting further investment. At present, there are protocols for collaboration and cooperation between my Department and the Department of Education. The FE sector can work with schools as part of area planning, and it is important that we properly embed that collaboration in a wider strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds.

Student Mobility: North/South Flow

6. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in re-exploring removing barriers to North/South mobility at undergraduate level, with hope for progress on the matter in time for this year's students so that no more are failed, whether he, given the continuing difficulties in mobility and the small number of student flows, would consider establishing a team to manage a dedicated hotline to advise careers teachers, students and their parents who are seeking to explore the possibility of Southern universities and to answer specific questions on the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. (AQT 1066/11-15)

Dr Farry: I am happy to reassure the Member that we are giving this top priority, not least because there is a financial rationale for doing so, in that, given that the nature of flows in respect of further education and higher education are primarily from South to North, that creates a financial pressure on our budgets. It is important that we encourage much greater flows in both directions on the island. I will, however, stress that the answer to the current problems probably lies more in the Southern jurisdiction than it does here in Northern Ireland. I hate to say this to the Member but, at times, the lead authorities in the South take a rather partitionist approach to education on the island of Ireland. For example, John O'Dowd and I have been pushing the issue around A-level equivalents for a considerable number of years. There is no immediate sign of the overarching university authorities in the South showing flexibility in that regard. It is very much through the actions of individual universities that we are making progress, but we need a wider policy if we are to properly ensure that we have good, strong flows in both directions on the island.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Flanagan for a supplementary question. I encourage him to be brief.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Aontaím leis an Aire. I agree with the Minister that it is regrettable that some Southern institutions take a partitionist approach, but one of the major problems that we face in the North is access to accurate information and the fact that some careers teachers do not know how the CAO system works. So, I encourage the Minister to consider establishing a hotline that people could phone to get the information that they

need to allow them to make an informed choice about where they are going to go.

Dr Farry: On the specifics of what the Member has said, I assure him that that is something that we will look at. He will also be pleased to note that, as part of the terms of reference between my Department and the Department of Education for the joint review of careers, the issue of North/South student mobility is a specific area that we have asked them to explore and examine. We expect recommendations in that regard later this year.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Lord Morrow has withdrawn his name, and Mr Copeland is not in his place.

South West College

9. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he will congratulate South West College, which has five campuses in Tyrone and Fermanagh, on its ranking of fourth out of 350 further education colleges across Britain and the North. (AQT 1069/11-15)

Dr Farry: Absolutely. The South West College is a huge asset to Northern Ireland. It is extremely well respected as an FE college throughout these islands. It is also worth stressing that the college has recently been inspected and has received top marks in that regard, which is virtually unheard of. Within that, it is especially important to recognise that it received a top score for its training offer. In that particular aspect of the work of colleges, it is extremely rare for that accolade to be passed on to a college. We are very keen to learn wider lessons on how the college has been so successful and apply them across our wider further education offer and the review of youth training that we are undertaking.

2.45 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1, 6, 10 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Tourism Strategy

2. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when the tourism strategy will be published. (AQO 6057/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The key strategic targets for tourism are contained in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. The past couple of years have been very important for Northern Ireland tourism, and my focus has been on delivering the tourism product, major events and global marketing campaigns to ensure success and bring maximum economic benefit to the local economy. I am delighted with what has been achieved, and it is an opportune time to consider future plans. A review of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and wider tourism structures is due to be completed by the end of this month.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for her answer. I agree that action is more important, perhaps, than the strategy itself. I understand that we are well on our way to meeting the PFG targets.

With the Giro happening in the next couple of days, much of Northern Ireland has turned pink. What will be the benefits for local businesses, such as the Ballyhackamore traders, who have really embraced it?

Mrs Foster: Picking up on your last point about Ballyhackamore traders really embracing the Giro, a very strong point of the build-up to the Giro has been the fact that communities across the race route have got involved in the whole festival atmosphere of the build-up. Of course, they will be able to receive a tangible benefit in their businesses as a result of all of that.

There are a number of businesses locally that have been employed by the race organisers. That has covered everything from putting down tarmac in the Titanic Quarter to providing support services and health services. Those things are all being provided locally, so there is a real and tangible benefit.

The race is coming this weekend. We are all very much looking forward to it, and I welcome the fact that even Stormont has gone pink for the event.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister accept that any future tourism strategy must be more than a stand-alone document for the North and needs to include provisions for cross-border and all-Ireland potential?

Mrs Foster: For a start, we do work with Tourism Ireland on our promotional activities. It is always a challenge to get stand-out for

Northern Ireland in global markets. That is what everybody in this House should be concerned about: the fact that our local market needs to be promoted across the world. I have been pushing Tourism Ireland in that respect and will continue to do so. I make no apology for doing that, because I was appointed to make sure that the local tourism market gains the benefit.

If there are events happening in the Republic of Ireland that we can benefit from, of course we will work with the authorities there to take the benefit for our local market.

Mr Storey: In relation to major events, I congratulate the Minister and welcome the investment that she and her Department have made to secure the Northern Ireland Open Challenge golf tournament in my North Antrim constituency at Galgorm Castle. Will she give an indication of how important events such as that are to the Northern Ireland economy and what role they will play in building a strategy for success in securing major events?

Mrs Foster: It has been seen, particularly since our campaigning year of 2012, that events have been very much the focus of the Tourist Board. The more events of international standing that we bring in, the more we get attention in the rest of the world. I was particularly pleased to be up in Galgorm last Thursday to announce the investment in that event for the coming year. It was a very good event last year, and they are planning to build on that this year, not just with golf but by having a food festival in and around the golf event. Golf tourism is a huge part of what we do in the tourism sector. Some £22 million is invested every year by people who come to Northern Ireland because of golf. That, on its own, should let you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, why we spend a lot of our time talking about golf. It is because we have the ambassadors and the golf courses, and, therefore, we take advantage of that with our golf tourists.

Events play a key part of what we do in tourism, and they will continue to do so. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McKinney: I am sorry. My phone has provided a bit of an introduction.

I thank the Minister and Mr Flanagan. Does the Minister agree that a key objective of a tourism strategy should be the reduction of VAT for services provided by the hospitality sector?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. On occasion, the Member's

parliamentary colleague, the Member for South Down, has also raised this issue with me. It is a matter for the Treasury at Westminster because we do not have VAT powers in Northern Ireland. We believe that, if VAT were looked at, it would be beneficial to the entire tourism sector in the UK because we are at a competitive disadvantage in relation to our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland.

Jobs: PFG Commitments

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the number of jobs promoted through the commitments contained in the Programme for Government 2011-15. (AQO 6058/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The most recent information available from Invest Northern Ireland is for the period to 30 September 2013, at which point the agency had promoted 17,201 jobs against the Programme for Government target of 25,000. Invest Northern Ireland is validating the most recent full-year performance information, which will include the number of jobs promoted, and it expects to be able to publish that information shortly.

During the month of April alone, Invest NI announced that its support will help to create over 2,200 new jobs. That is fantastic news for all of Northern Ireland, with jobs being created in Londonderry, Portadown, Antrim, Carrickfergus, Belfast and Tyrone. It is the direct result of the hard work and continued focus by Invest Northern Ireland, ministerial colleagues and me to promote Northern Ireland as a great location in which to invest and grow your business.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. It certainly is good to see jobs being created right across Northern Ireland. Will the Minister give an update on the number of jobs created in my constituency of Newry and Armagh?

Mrs Foster: As of 31 December 2013, the jobs fund had promoted a total of 316 jobs in Newry and Armagh, 250 of which have already been created. They include 31 jobs from business investment projects at various stages of development, which should lead to the creation of 249 further new jobs, 140 of which have already been created. The figures are good, but we always look to improve them, and we will do so in conjunction with firms already in Armagh and those looking to Armagh as a positive place to invest.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra chuimsitheach go nuige seo. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive reply to date. Will she provide us with some information and detail on when the jobs will be created as opposed to promoted?

Mrs Foster: That was raised with me last year, as the Member knows. We now have the figures for the jobs fund, which is why I was able to give figures for the jobs that it promoted and created. As you know, Invest Northern Ireland is looking at how it can do the same for international investment firms. It is somewhat difficult because we give firms a letter of offer for a particular period. During that period, they can ramp it up or down. So it is important that, at the end of the period, firms have employed the number that they said they would, but only at the end of the period. In some cases, firms ramp up quickly and, therefore, the jobs are created quickly. In other instances, we get the jobs only at the end of the period. So it is more challenging to provide information on foreign direct investment jobs. However, with the jobs fund, because questions were asked, and rightly so, about the number of jobs created as opposed to promoted, we have endeavoured to give that information.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Nesbitt for a supplementary question.

Mr Nesbitt: I did not rise. Mr McGlone asked my supplementary question, and the Minister answered it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is one very happy Member.

Apprenticeships

4. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what opportunities exist for engagement between her Department and the Department for Employment and Learning in determining the number of apprenticeships to be provided in different work areas. (AQO 6059/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have regular discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning, including engagements at the Executive subcommittee on the economy. My Department and Invest Northern Ireland are already working closely with DEL to support apprenticeships and the provision of future skills needs for priority sectors and markets. Invest NI's chief executive participated in the

expert panel that was established to inform DEL's review of apprenticeships and youth training. In collaboration with Invest NI and employers, DEL has set up working groups to consider the specific skills required by key sectors now and in the longer term.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for her response. What evidence is there on the attitude of local businesses towards the skills level in the workforce? Has the Minister suggested any improvements in that respect recently?

Mrs Foster: When it comes to the local workforce, one of our strengths in Northern Ireland is our size. We interface with all the major sectors quite frequently, and, if any skills gaps are emerging, we are made aware of them in a timely fashion. That is what led to, for example, the software testers' academy being set up by me and the Department for Employment and Learning. We felt that there was a need to bring more software testers into the economy. That has been hugely successful, and some 95% of people who graduated from the academy had a job at the end of the apprenticeship and the end of the software testers' academy. That is very encouraging, and we will continue to keep in close contact with employers so that we understand where the skills gaps may be. In identifying those skills gaps, we need to work collaboratively to make sure that we can address those issues in the future.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers today. What is being done to encourage professional and technical apprenticeships in the public sector?

Mrs Foster: We can assist very much with that. We feel that there is a need to look at that whole area and to try to bring people in at an early stage to get them skilled up for work in the public sector. I attended a very interesting conference this morning in Enniskillen: Recruit and Retain is a European conference with eight partners across Europe that looks at how we can recruit people from rural areas to the public sector and to professional jobs and retain them in those areas. It was a fascinating conference, and I took a lot away from it. I will look at ways in which we can implement it. If people here think that Fermanagh is a long way away, they should try looking at Greenland or Iceland. There are certainly more challenging rural parts of Europe compared with Fermanagh, and we should remember that. However, there are opportunities to try to solve some of the

problems and to recruit and retain people in rural areas.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's response to date. As someone who represents a cross-border constituency, I know the importance of collaboration between those areas. There was a question on higher-level apprenticeships earlier, and I will develop that theme. Has the Minister had any discussions with her counterparts in the South to develop an all-island strategy on apprenticeships?

Mrs Foster: Cooperation and Working Together organised today's event. That organisation is involved in the health sector on both sides of the border. It organised the conference in conjunction with partners across Europe. I took a lot away from that, and I intend to have discussions with colleagues about it because there is more that we can do. Those may not be earth-shattering things, but they can make a difference to some of our rural communities. It can be a win-win for the community and, indeed, for professional people.

Gas Network

5. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the gas network extension to the west of Northern Ireland. (AQO 6060/11-15)

Mrs Foster: On 6 February 2014, the Utility Regulator announced a licence competition for taking gas to towns in the west, with a licence award expected in the autumn.

The project will provide the opportunity for up to 40,000 business and domestic consumers in Dungannon, Coalisland, Cookstown, Magherafelt, Omagh, Enniskillen, Derrylin and Strabane to have a more efficient, lower-carbon and, potentially, cheaper choice of fuel. It is anticipated that construction works could commence in 2015, with the first customers connected to gas in 2016.

3.00 pm

Mr I McCrea: I thank the Minister for her efforts in trying to deliver this much needed gas to the west. Can the Minister outline the benefits that she feels it will bring to local businesses, given the fact that Dale Farm, a major employer in my constituency, believes that the introduction of gas could save it in the region of £1 million?

Mrs Foster: When you put it in hard figures like that, you can see that the difference that gas will make for Dale Farm, and for other public sector works, is very impressive. Last July, I wrote to the district councils in the west about the gas extension project. We engaged with Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt councillors about the gas project on 26 March, and, on 31 March, with Omagh and Fermanagh councillors. We hope to have a meeting with Strabane councillors in the coming weeks. So it is important that not only the business sector get involved but that the public sector embraces gas to the west so that they make it a viable option. I think that it will be of great assistance for those businesses, particularly with regard to cost, and, of course, we want to make our businesses more competitive.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for the information today. I am very pleased that our major employers in the west will be able to gain from having the option of energy from gas. The Minister outlined the specific areas and towns that will benefit from the availability of gas. Can she explain what domestic consumers will be able to avail themselves of gas? Will only newbuilds be able to connect to the gas pipeline? Perhaps she could give us some information on that.

Mrs Foster: No, we should be able to retrofit existing homes. If you think about it, you will realise that the homes in and around the greater Belfast area that have accessed gas were retrofitted for gas distribution. We hope that many homes along the way will seek to find out more about gas and put it in as an option for themselves. We realise that the gas extension project must be economically viable and that it has to have expected returns covering the cost of any new network. The Utility Regulator will work with the new licence companies. The fact that, at last, the west of the Province will be able to access gas should be universally welcomed.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's answers and her efforts to bring gas to the west. With regard to Strabane and Omagh, what are the likely bottlenecks to trying to make sure that we get this as quickly as possible, given the competitive edge that it would give to local businesses in future?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his very positive comments about bringing gas to the west. I ask him and other elected representatives in the west to work with the Department to make sure that we can deliver it in as timely a way as possible. As I said, I hope

that the licence will be awarded in the autumn, and then, of course, they will be looking at the route of the gas transmission line. Of course, as we know, every infrastructure brings challenges, and I ask that all Members look at it as sympathetically as they can.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers. Having engaged with a number of manufacturing businesses in our constituency, I know that this will be a game changer for many large energy users, so we welcome it on that front. However, can the Minister assure the House that the rationale for her enthusiasm for the project is not to sustain and justify her flawed support for fracking in Fermanagh?

Mrs Foster: I congratulate the Member for getting fracking in Fermanagh into a question about gas infrastructure. Just to put it on record, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is no fracking licence in Fermanagh. I wanted to say that very clearly, because there has been a lot of misinformation about what is going on in Fermanagh. There has been a lot of excitement from some quarters, but everybody should calm down and deal with the issues as they come up. My support for gas to the west is because there is an infrastructure deficit in the west of the Province. Therefore, we should address that deficit. I hope that he will join me in congratulating the Department on the work it has done so far in that regard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Although we do not discourage innovation, I encourage Members to try to ask questions relevant to what is being discussed.

Irish Open 2015: Tourism

7. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how her Department, in conjunction with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, will consult with tourism providers in Newcastle, County Down and the surrounding areas, to ensure that the facilities and accommodation on offer are adequately marketed in advance of the Irish Open 2015. (AQO 6062/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Irish Open in 2015 will help to grow domestic and overnight visitor numbers and spend, provide a positive image of Newcastle and the Mourne internationally, and build on other recent high-profile events to further demonstrate Northern Ireland's capacity to host major events.

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) will work with key partners to plan for and deliver the 2015 event. NITB will host an industry workshop similar to that in 2012 to encourage the tourism businesses in Newcastle to maximise opportunities arising from the Irish Open. NITB also plans to tailor WorldHost training to support the volunteer programme for 2015, as it did in 2012. NITB will promote the 2015 Irish Open at the 2014 event in Fota Island, County Cork, in June. Over the next year, it will be working up plans for destination campaigns featuring golf as well as potentially a dedicated golf campaign.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for her response. She will know about the benefits of the World Police and Fire Games: information was gathered up by the Tourist Board and locals and was provided in booklets etc. Something such as that would be a great help to the like of tourist providers, particularly in and around south Down.

What financial commitment have the Executive made to secure the Irish Open in 2015 and 2017?

Mrs Foster: I am not going to get into figures involved in commercial-in-confidence negotiations, but, because we had the Irish Open at Portrush in 2012, it has provided us with a great learning opportunity for further events in Newcastle and in Enniskillen in 2017. Do not forget that 2012 was an absolutely fabulous success. We should take away the very good messages from that as well. As we know, it had a sell-out crowd of 130,000 spectators. It won major plaudits from not only the European Tour but, importantly, the public who attended the event; there was exemplary organisation, production, and transport and parking initiatives. We all know that they can sometimes be challenging issues for major events.

We will certainly work with Newcastle on its planning. As well as that, Newcastle has the advantage of having much longer to plan for the Irish Open in 2015. When we announced in January of 2012 that the open was coming in June, it did not give us much time to put things in place. You have much longer to plan. I am sure that it will be a tremendous success, given the fact that it is a world-class course and that, already, there is a buzz among the professional players about coming to play Royal County Down.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for her response so far. What plans, if any, does the

Northern Ireland Tourist Board have with the local authority and the business community?

Mrs Foster: We will work with all partners, including our statutory partners, be they DRD or the new local council by that stage, and the industry. We will look at how many beds we have in the immediate area and how we can support the hotels, the bed and breakfasts and the self-catering accommodation. It is hugely important that we get everybody working in partnership; the success of the open at Royal Portrush was because of the fact that we were able to pull everybody in and that they worked in a very collaborative way.

Sometimes, when success happens, we do not congratulate those involved; we just take it for granted and move on to the next event. Sometimes, we need to step back and say, "Well, that was a job well done." It was a job well done by Royal Portrush, our council partners, DRD, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and all the other partners that worked with us at that time.

Game of Thrones: Tourism

8. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the locations that have been used in the filming of 'Game of Thrones' are being promoted to encourage additional tourism. (AQO 6063/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department, through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland, has undertaken new campaigns to promote the various locations that are used in filming 'Game of Thrones'. Recently, at the invitation of NITB and Tourism Ireland, almost 20 journalists from around the world visited Northern Ireland to explore some of those locations, including the Dark Hedges near Ballymoney, as well as Cushendun, Cairncastle, Glenarm, Ballintoy and, on the final day, Tollymore forest, Inch Abbey and Castle Ward in County Down.

I also recently launched Tourism Ireland's advertising and social media campaign in conjunction with 'Game of Thrones' creators, HBO, to promote Northern Ireland holidays across the world. NITB showcases a number of 'Game of Thrones' tours on its consumer website, where there is also a section dedicated specifically to the 'Game of Thrones' exhibition in June.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for her answer. The spectacular rugged scenery in my constituency of East Antrim and on the

Causeway Coast has been widely promoted by the series. Can the Minister advise how she is cooperating with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to develop medieval Carrickfergus Castle and other such facilities to capture the imagination and enhance the tourism product that visitors might have when they come?

Mrs Foster: I know that the castle has been used for filming projects other than 'Game of Thrones'. I cannot recall the name of the film that was produced there. It was "techno" something — I just cannot think.

Mr Ross: 'The Overlords'.

Mrs Foster: 'The Overlords'; that is right. So, Carrickfergus Castle has already been identified, and I know that the Minister has plans to open the castle to the wider public. It is a fabulous resource to have. I hope that, when we do that, we do not lose some of the authenticity that we have in Carrickfergus Castle but instead capture that and allow everybody to take advantage of it.

Mr Campbell: There was a recent announcement by HBO and Tourism Ireland regarding the usage of the HBO brand. Given HBO's internationally recognisable brand, what plans are there to ensure that we maximise the return as that progresses and makes further significant inroads into film-making in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. The partnership between HBO and Tourism Ireland has been very significant. I think that it is the very first time that HBO has agreed to such a partnership. It is a major coup for tourism and, indeed, for Northern Ireland that we can access the massive fan base that there is, particularly, but not solely, in the United States of America and South America, wider Europe and beyond.

We are trying to use some of the language and straplines of the series and put them alongside some of our beautiful coastline, such as the Dark Hedges and places like that. I am not sure whether the Member wants me to use the strapline that I understand is used in one 'Game of Thrones' series that says that "all men must die". I am not sure that that is one that we could use. I am sure that my female colleagues would have something to say about that. *[Laughter.]* In any event, it is a fabulous opportunity for Northern Ireland tourism. I very much hope that we can take advantage of the fact that, alongside HBO, we are now

advertising to the wider world. It is a great opportunity.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. The Minister may be aware of the historic film trails in counties Wexford and Wicklow, which plot films right from the 1930s up to more recent films such as 'Braveheart' and 'Saving Private Ryan'. She may also be aware of the economic benefit to places such as the village of Cong in County Mayo, for example, that came from a certain 'The Quiet Man'. Are there any plans to do something similar here in the North?

Mrs Foster: The exciting prospect of the routes is the fact that private sector companies now have tours that go right along the points that I talked about. They are going to bring people on private tours and show them all around the north Antrim coast and County Down and relate it back to 'Game of Thrones'. So, yes, a number of private companies are doing that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We will now move on to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Jobs: April Announcements

1. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many jobs she has successfully brought to Northern Ireland in April and since the beginning of the year, given that she is due congratulations for bringing 241 Schrader Electronics jobs to his constituency last week. (AQT 1071/11-15)

Mrs Foster: April was a tremendous month for us for jobs announcements. We were able to announce 2,200 new jobs for Northern Ireland, and, by anyone's standard, that has been tremendously good news. At Schrader, the company that the Member mentioned, we announced 241 new jobs. It is an excellent company, taking advantage of research and development and then putting that into production and manufacturing and thereby creating jobs. I think that it was there that I said that we were in a virtuous cycle of R&D bringing forward jobs, and that is exactly what I have been talking about over the years. Sometimes, if we spend a lot of money on research and development, people think that we could have spent that on jobs, but, of course, it will be spent on jobs in the longer term because

research and development leads to production and to manufacturing, which leads to new jobs.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her response and for her Department's work with Invest NI on the work that it has done in securing those jobs. However, many want to focus on the negatives on the jobs front, and we only ever hear publicity on negative attitudes towards jobs and unemployment. Will the Minister update the House on what difference this has made to the unemployment figures on the register in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: We have for the fourteenth month seen a reduction in the numbers of people claiming unemployment-related benefits. In the month of March, it was reduced by 700, and we very much welcome that. However, we are not complacent, and we know that there is a still big job of work to be done. That is why we try to work with companies at the very high end and also companies at the lower end. We know that there is need for jobs of every description, and that is why we will continue to work hard to try to bring as many jobs as we can into Northern Ireland.

Living Wage

2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she will ensure that all positions created through Invest NI pay a living wage, following the recent example of Belfast City Council, which became the first council in Ireland to adopt the living wage as opposed to the minimum wage. (AQT 1072/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Of course, Invest Northern Ireland is interested in the private sector median wage when we look at jobs created, because our focus is very much on rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy. The very best way to bring wages up is to bring more high-level jobs into Northern Ireland. That is why I was particularly delighted with some of the announcements during April of jobs at a higher level, such as the jobs that were brought in by EY. That was a very good announcement, bringing in jobs with an average salary in the region of £40,000 when they are all put in place. That is tremendously good news, and those are the kinds of focuses that Northern Ireland and Invest NI should have.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I give it to the Minister; she evaded the question fairly well. The specific issue is that there are an awful lot of people who are in work and are living in

poverty due to the low-wage economy that exists in some places. Will she indicate whether she will introduce a policy in Invest NI where all jobs that are created through that agency will be paid at least the living wage to try to take the working people out of poverty?

Mrs Foster: If the Member were to persist with the living wage agenda, it could cost people their jobs. I remember very well coming to the House to talk about the jobs fund and the need to create jobs, not of a very high level in respect of salary, but to allow people to get off the unemployment register. He is now saying that he does not want those types of jobs and only wants jobs of a certain level. You cannot have it both ways. We must be consistent. We must focus on bringing high-level jobs into Northern Ireland. That is certainly where my focus is, and, if we can create jobs for people along the way that maybe are not of a higher level but which will give them an opportunity to work for a living, I will definitely engage in that.

Exploris: Business Case

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she has had sight of the Ards Borough Council business case that will transform and maintain Exploris, given that, in earlier responses to him, she recognised the importance of Exploris in Portaferry as a regional facility for tourism, science and economic development. (AQT 1073/11-15)

Mrs Foster: As the Member will know, the Tourist Board has provided a considerable amount of money to Exploris over the years since Ards Borough Council opened the facility in 1987. I readily accept that Exploris is an important facility and key visitor attraction in the Strangford lough area. I congratulate Ards Borough Council for its efforts to secure a positive future for the facility.

However, the struggle comes in the required one-off capital grant of £914,000 towards a general refurbishment and redevelopment. From my perspective, NITB has currently no capital funds available. That does not mean that the Executive have no capital funds available. I am simply relaying to him that NITB has no capital funds available in terms of that particular ask. We will, of course, support them in everything ask but we do not have that capital funding. If we did, we would probably open a tourism development scheme for that purpose.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. She may know that 28 May is the date for the council to decide the future of Exploris. Does the Minister recognise the urgency of the Executive giving their approval to the future of Exploris before 28 May and will she commit to give her support to the report that comes before the Executive, hopefully during the course of this month?

Mrs Foster: Certainly, we will look at any report that comes to the Executive before the end of this month. I do, of course, recognise the urgency because this has been going on for some time and there is a need to bring closure for everybody involved. Those involved in the campaign have conducted them in a professional manner. It is something that will come before the Executive, I hope before the end of May, to allow a decision to be taken.

Giro d'Italia

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what hopes she has for the Giro d'Italia and maximising its benefits for Northern Ireland, given that she deserves to be commended for the work that she has done, particularly — and it is on record from the producer of BBC Sport — in getting the event televised for the people of Northern Ireland. (AQT 1074/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are two answers to that question. The first is locally here. I very much hope that it will again raise civic pride across Northern Ireland. The fact that BBC Northern Ireland is going to show live coverage of the event across Northern Ireland is a positive part of what we are doing. Internationally, we are saying that Northern Ireland is a good place to visit for various reasons, not least for the outdoor activity sector, which has grown in recent years. We have a lot of product in outdoor activity and if you would like to spend your holiday in that way, there is no better place to come than Northern Ireland.

It is a global message but also a message to our local community to have civic pride in Northern Ireland. I hope that they very much feel that pride this weekend.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. This event, coupled with the golfing events that she has been pioneering in bringing to Northern Ireland, fits into the overall tourism package for the Province. In terms of where that product is going in the overall tourism potential that exists in Northern Ireland, where does the Minister see that progressing?

Mrs Foster: Our Programme for Government target is to make tourism a £1 billion industry and we are very much on target to do that. We did that by investing in tourism products. One thinks of Titanic Belfast, for example, and the way that we made that a real catalyst to bring people into Northern Ireland. However, around that we must also have events, and events, dear boy, are very important to us in Northern Ireland. That is true for the Irish Open, the MTV music awards, the World Police and Fire Games and, now, the Giro d'Italia, which we are very much looking forward to.

It is about bringing international events to Northern Ireland. I hope that when the world looks into Northern Ireland at the weekend, it will be well impressed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Leslie Cree is not in his place. Mr Jim Wells is not in his place. Ms Anna Lo.

EU Membership

7. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she agrees that it is in Northern Ireland's economic interests for the UK to remain in and play a full part in the European Union, given the great news about the jobs created by Schrader Electronics that were mentioned earlier, which are as a result of new EU regulations on car tyre pressure. (AQT 1077/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I think what you have seen in Schrader is that it has looked at the market, whether it is in the United States of America or, indeed, in Europe, and has future-proofed itself against that. It has said, "Well, what regulation can we see coming into our sphere and how can we address the challenge that that brings?" I think that that is a very clever way of building your business.

When speaking to the management of Schrader it has been very clear that it has great growth plans, not just for the European Union but actually into China as its next target. It has a number of people working in China to try to figure out where those opportunities are. So, it is the case that businesses, if they are future-proofing themselves, will look to the opportunities, and I think that is what that company has done.

Ms Lo: I certainly agree with the Minister, but is it not important for us to remember — I want to ask the Minister's opinion on this — that we must provide certainty? In particular, a lot of investors look at the benefits of investing in

Northern Ireland as, first of all, the fact that it is an English-speaking country, but, secondly, the fact that it is within the EU. So is it not important that we should remain in the EU to attract inward investment?

Mrs Foster: There are many businesses that would say that, if they were out of the EU, they would benefit from a cut in regulation, because, as the Member will know, 70% of our laws come from the European Union, and they feel very burdened by that. What we are trying to do is address those regulations that they feel are burdensome through our business red tape initiative. However, I think you will find businesses that want to remain within the European Union and, likewise, you will find businesses that feel that they would be better off out, to use the terminology. I do not think there is any clear answer in that.

From my point of view, what is very important is our membership of the United Kingdom. I think you have seen that develop over the last couple of months in the argument about Scottish independence. I think businesses will be very clear that the United Kingdom is much better than a stand-alone Scotland. That is something that I agree with, because I think that four nations of the United Kingdom work much stronger together. That is certainly the message that I get from businesses.

Invest NI: Support for Businesses

8. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the support Invest NI is giving to companies that are experiencing difficulties in getting finance to grow their business, given that, over the past number of weeks, there has been encouraging news from the Ulster Bank and Danske Bank, which have made a profit in the first quarter of 2014. (AQT 1078/11-15)

Mrs Foster: First of all, I very much welcome the fact that both of the main banks have returned a profit. It is a good sign that they are dealing with their difficulties. I hope that means that they can lend more to businesses, but, in the meantime, as the Member will be aware, Invest Northern Ireland has developed its own suite of access to finance products. In doing so, it hopes to provide support to companies, but also to work in partnerships with banks so that, perhaps, as Invest Northern Ireland goes in with a package, the banks can then come in on the back of that.

Certainly, the whole impetus around the agri-loan scheme that has been launched is

because the banks perhaps did not feel confidence to invest, particularly in poultry, where there was very little security. We came in and tried to provide that security and now we have seen some of those loans going out the doors of the banks. That is a good template and is something that we should look to use in the future.

Ms McCorley: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not being in the Chamber for my question. It was just by the very narrowest of margins that I missed out.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Protestant Working-class Boys: Underachievement

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the issues raised in the report produced by the Community Relations Council regarding the underachievement at GCSE of Protestant working-class boys in receipt of free school meals; notes with concern that this reinforces the conclusions of other similar reports over a number of years; further notes the positive action which the Minister of Education has taken to support other ethnic and minority groups who are underachieving; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline the specific steps his Department is taking to redress this situation and establish a meaningful sectoral body for the controlled sector to enable it to address this issue in the same manner as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, which has been able to tackle underachievement in the maintained sector. — [Mr Storey.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "Community Relations Council" and insert:

"which once again sets out the close correlation between socio-economic background and exam success; further notes that the most significant divisions in education are based on gender and class and that it is the interplay between these which drives inequality; calls on the Minister of Education to work with all concerned to abolish the inequities in the education system designed to produce further inequality and to continue to take measures for all those who are underachieving regardless of class, creed or ethnic background; and further calls on the Minister of Education to set out the further steps his Department can take, including the establishment of a meaningful sectoral support body for the controlled sector as set out in the Education Bill, to support Protestant working-class boys who are not achieving their full potential." — [Ms Maeve McLaughlin.]

Mr Lunn: Once again, we return to the problem of underachievement amongst working-class Protestant boys, something that has been discussed in the House, in Committee and in other places, certainly since I joined the Assembly, and probably long before that. The

Community Relations Council report reinforces what we already know. As usual, we have an excellent information pack from the Assembly research service to back up the statistics.

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

What do we know? We know that, currently, Catholic pupils outperform Protestants and others; that girls outperform boys; that pupils entitled to free school meals underperform; that grammar schools outperform secondary schools, which is hardly a surprise, given the nature of their intake; and that Protestant boys underperform if they are from working-class areas and/or are on free school meals. I do not want to get into the statistics, but another way of looking at those figures is that working-class and/or children entitled to free school meals, from whatever background, underachieve, and that maintained schools of a non-selective type do a better job of bringing the best out of their pupils than controlled schools do.

Why is that? The DUP motion appears, perhaps unusually, to give credit to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). You could almost call that progress. Perhaps we should consider allowing the CCMS to expand its remit to cover the whole education sector, but I do not think that that is going to happen. So, in the meantime, the motion demands that a meaningful controlled school sectoral body do the same job, something that is actually reflected in the Sinn Féin amendment, which refers to the fact that that is set out in the Education Bill. Since I mention the Education Bill, and Mrs McLaughlin has already made the point, I will say this: if the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) were to go ahead, a sectoral body would be part of the deal. I have no doubt that it could, given the same financial assistance that has been available to CCMS over the years, improve the situation for the lowest achieving pupils. However, the same parties that demand representation for controlled schools block the Bill. I really do not understand that. If anybody wants to intervene, they are very welcome. I would love to see, even at this late stage, the ESA Bill come before the House to be properly discussed and amended in the way that we are meant to deal with legislation. Given all the concessions that have been made, I do not know what the objections to the ESA Bill are now, particularly from the DUP. I think that it may be something around controlled sector representation and the ownership of controlled schools, but, surely, it is not beyond us to bring something like that to a conclusion. Even at this stage, I hope that we can perhaps do something about that.

I go back to the problem of underachievement amongst Protestant boys. The problem is complex. I am sure that we would do better with a non-selective system, and I am equally sure that all our children would thrive in mixed schools; whether they were integrated formally or otherwise would, I am sure, not matter that much. I would love to see the statistics for integrated schools where children are educated together and, perhaps, for schools that are not formally integrated, of which there are a number. Do the girls still outperform the boys? Do Catholics still outperform Protestants? I really do not know, but, frankly, I doubt it.

Protestant working-class parents could and should be more involved in their children's education. The other day, I was told anecdotally by a teacher in a controlled primary school that parents have to sign off homework, and regularly, when all the answers are wrong, the homework is still signed off by the parent as being correct. She does not think that that is because the parents cannot add or cannot read; it is because they cannot be bothered — they just sign the thing. That is a small example, and something that I am quite sure happens across the board in schools that are then seen to be underperforming.

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Maybe, at this point, he will join me in commending the work of the Resurgam Trust in Lisburn, for example, which is involved in early intervention? I sit on the board of that trust, and we are driving forward a pilot scheme to deal with the underachievement of working-class Protestant boys, particularly but not exclusively, which has brought together the relevant stakeholders. It is that type of work that we need to see the Department of Education and other Departments pioneering and driving forward and showing a commitment to those areas.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: I thank Mr Givan for that intervention. I am perfectly happy to endorse the work of the Resurgam Trust in many areas, and I am aware of the scheme that he is talking about. There are plenty of initiatives out there to try to improve the lot of Protestant working-class boys. We need something departmental and something more wide-ranging perhaps, but that scheme is a good one.

I believe that, in some areas, the paramilitary organisations need to get off the back of the community. Grammar schools and other

successful schools could be encouraged, perhaps with departmental assistance through area learning groups —

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

Mr Lunn: — to provide assistance to their less-successful neighbours. I find little to disagree with in either the motion or the amendment, and we will support both. However, I look forward to hearing from the Minister in due course as to what new initiatives he has up his sleeve.

Mr Moutray: I support the motion proposed by my colleague Mervyn Storey. One of the most disturbing aspects of the Nolan report is the fact that this is not the first time that issues of underachievement within this group of young men has been highlighted. Indeed, this is the latest in a long line of reports that make similar points. The issue of underachievement engenders much debate in our education system today. Regrettably, I feel that, all too often, we are quick to offer solutions on the subject that have more to do with political ideology rather than the particular needs of the young people or on a clear understanding of what constitutes underachievement.

At the Education Committee last week, all of us were struck by the evidence from Michael Gilsonan, who gave an alternative view of why many children fail, which does not often receive the attention that it deserves. To the best of my knowledge, he has not figured highly in discussions on underachievement. The young men highlighted in the Nolan report are largely educated within the controlled sector, and it is on that issue that I would like to make some comments.

When the Protestant Churches transferred their schools to be vested in local education committees in the 1930s and 1940s, the political landscape was very different from the one that we operate in today. At the time, it was anticipated that the controlled system would become the state school system and, over the years, that sector has developed in a way that has encompassed all types of schools. There are Irish-medium, all-Catholic, integrated and controlled schools, as well as special, grammar, secondary, primary and nursery schools. The sector educates children from all communities, but the vast majority of the pupils come from the Protestant community.

However, as with most ideas, things do not work out as anticipated, and we now live in a society where there is a much greater demand

from communities for services tailored to their needs and wishes: one size does not fit all. We now have a number of bodies within education that promote their particular brand of education and demand that the boards, which are direct descendants of the local education committees, are impartial in the promotion of their type of schooling. Furthermore, all schools, of whatever type, now receive 100% funding from the state so are, in a sense, state schools. To complicate matters, the boards are seen by Sinn Féin and the Minister as being there to do their bidding. They are no longer seen as the promoters of state education via the controlled sector, and increasingly they operate in a way that is totally at odds with the wishes of the community that they are supposed to serve.

In the area that I represent, the Southern Education and Library Board has attempted to force through solutions for schooling in the controlled sector that do not have the support of the community served by those schools. The community has supported the operation of the Dickson plan for many years. It wants it to continue, and it wants to see all pupils, especially those in Craigavon Senior High School, in high-quality buildings receiving education appropriate to their needs and, in the case of Craigavon Senior High School, with good links established with FE to provide vocational pathways for those pupils from the school environment into the world of work. Instead, during that process, the board and the Minister have demonised the community and misrepresented my party as only interested in grammar schools. The Minister has held to ransom the pupils in Craigavon Senior High School in substandard buildings until he gets the board to push through his ideological view of future schooling in the area.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: I will, yes.

Mr Storey: Does the Member agree that there is another location in Northern Ireland where the controlled sector is being held to ransom and that is in Enniskillen? Over 10 years ago, Devenish College was promised a brand new school as a result of an amalgamation, and now we are told by the Western Education and Library Board that, unless we play ball in the overall shape of area planning, it will not get a new school. That is another example of the boards not being able to deliver specifically for the controlled sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Moutray: Thank you. I take on board and agree with the Member's point.

Having seen the last attempt end in complete failure, we are now to be forced into another consultation exercise, which will not end, we are told, until March 2015. I fear that that is more to do with an acting chief executive, placed there by the Department of Education, trying to keep his paymaster happy.

It is in that environment that the Protestant community in Armagh generally and in Craigavon in particular now says, "We want equality for our children. No more sham processes. We want a body that will speak up for the type of education system that is based on the Dickson plan, which permits parental choice and offers different pathways to our young people".

It is not acceptable for trustees in the maintained sector to receive 100% state funding for their schools, have a separate process for considering the planning of their schools, operated by CCMS, and have trustee representatives sitting on the Southern Board who decide which type of schooling is available to parents in the controlled sector. That is not equality of treatment, and any new arrangement must remedy that.

The Minister and his party appear unwilling or unable to tackle the inequalities of the present structures. His attempts through the Education Bill have failed to date to command support from the Protestant community. I, therefore, support the motion and call on the Minister to act and to establish a targeted programme to deal with this particular type of underachievement, including the establishment of a controlled sector body, —

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

Mr Moutray: — thereby providing equality of treatment for all sectors.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the amendment moved by Maeve McLaughlin. For me, the strength of the amendment is that it accepts that there is a link between educational underachievement and social disadvantage. It, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the issue in an effective and enduring way, rather than, as the motion

suggests, in a narrow way, which, at best, can only partially address this.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the Member giving way. Will he clarify for the House whether he and his party believe that it was wrong for the same argument to be used years ago to establish a particular body, the CCMS, to address specific needs in the Catholic sector? Should that have been addressed within the overall generic process in education?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCartney: I will come to that throughout my contribution.

I think that the motion is narrow, as I said, and is premised on a degree of denial and pretend positions. That was exemplified this morning in an intervention from William Humphrey, who somehow suggested that, from his experience in Belfast, the Nolan report had called it wrong. That is why I make that point.

Mervyn Storey, in his contribution as the Chair, accepted that there is underachievement and said that it has no barriers. However, in my opinion, he failed to come to terms with how to deal with this and the core issues, except to blame everybody and everything. It was stark that, when he moved the motion, there was no sense or acceptance that academic selection plays any role in educational underachievement. That is despite the fact that those who support and, indeed, advocate academic selection accept that the division of children at 11 has a detrimental effect on their achievement, attainment and social well-being. Why is it that that cannot be accepted? Sometimes, it is practically denied.

I suppose that there is one thread of hope in all this, in that there is now an acceptance of the findings of the Nolan report, expect for Mr Humphrey's reservations, and that there is —

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The reservations that I expressed — I stand by the remarks that I made this morning in the House — are held not just by me but by educational practitioners whom I have spoken to across north Belfast. They educate young people in primary and secondary schools across the constituency and include the principal of Ashfield Boys' High School here in east Belfast. Clearly, those are not only my concerns but those of the wider community, including people who are charged with educating our young people.

3.45 pm

Mr McCartney: I find it interesting that the issue has not had any public commentary, but there seems to be a denial that working-class boys are underachieving, which everybody else seems to accept. The aim of any education system should be framed within the rights, entitlements and equality of all citizens. An education system's priority should be that all our young people know that the system will ensure that they reach their full potential, without any barriers.

John O'Dowd and Sinn Féin wholly accept that there is inequality in the education system and that, as a consequence, young people are underachieving. That is accepted as being a particular phenomenon among working-class Protestant boys. However, the question remains, and it is the question that we have to address today: what do we do about it? Do we continue with an approach that highlights that there is inequality and underachievement and allow report after report, or do we do something about it? This party has taken the necessary steps and highlighted the steps that remain to be taken so that those inequalities can be addressed. We will continue to play our part in tackling underachievement.

The Nolan report confirms what John O'Dowd, other Education Ministers and a host of educationalists have been stating for years. It is nothing new: pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have greater obstacles to overcome in education. We all accept that. It follows, therefore, that, if those schools need more resources specifically to target that underachievement, we should be taking steps to provide them.

When the Minister announced new funding arrangements, what was the response from those on the Benches opposite? Did they welcome or challenge it? Those are the questions that people —

Mr Storey: The schools did not accept it.

Mr McCartney: I think that you may be talking about particular schools, but, in general, most schools accepted it. I will be kind and positive: there is an opportunity today for you to spell out how this could be achieved. I have heard no credible —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can all remarks be made through the Chair, please?

Mr McCartney: I have heard no credible explanation as to why this was not accepted. As Maeve McLaughlin pointed out earlier, in a previous six-hour debate in the Assembly, there was but one passing reference from the Benches opposite about working-class boys. People need to ask why that was the case.

I am aware, and I have no doubt that the Minister will restate this today —

Mr Kinahan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Go ahead.

Mr Kinahan: We hear this all the time, one party saying that another party does not mention certain issues. This side and your side have always mentioned both sides, and that sort of comment should stop. Do you agree that the new finance formula was not agreed by the schools and was not discussed with them and taken on board? We have no proof that the funding —

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

Mr Kinahan: — in the way that the Minister is doing it, will work.

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

Mr G Robinson: In recent days, we have heard much talk of equality, and this topic is a genuine matter of equality. The recent Community Relations Council report highlights the education inequality that is suffered by Protestant working-class boys. This situation must be addressed urgently.

The Minister has taken positive action in other sections of society that suffer from low educational achievement, and it is now time for him to address the educational underachievement of working-class Protestant boys. My colleague the Education Committee Chair Mervyn Storey proposed that a body, similar to the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, should be set up for the controlled sector in Northern Ireland. The CCMS has had a positive impact on pupils' results in the schools under its guidance. Something similar must be done to aid Protestant schoolchildren so that equality of opportunity remains. Every constituency has pupils from backgrounds that suffer financially, but that should never be a block to their attaining the maximum in their education.

Let us never forget that educational attainment can be directly linked to the possibility and type of employment that an individual can obtain. It is, therefore, essential that we ensure that all our young people attain the maximum that they can through our education system. That is important for them and for the economic prospects of Northern Ireland.

Our young people's future depends on their gaining a good education, which opens employment opportunities to them and will also boost Northern Ireland's economy through having the skilled workforce that inward investors require to invest in.

Due to the importance of the issue, I urge the Minister to take action as soon as is practicable to ensure that the underachievement in the education of Protestant boys is positively addressed for the sake of the pupils and Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Robinson: I have finished. Sorry.

Mr Rogers: Educational underachievement must be addressed wherever it is found. The recent report from the Community Relations Council confirms that educational underachievement is a major issue facing Northern Ireland's young people. That must be tackled as a matter of urgency. The council's report shows that a range of groups across our communities are failing in worryingly large numbers to achieve five good GCSEs. The situation is most acute for Protestant males in receipt of free school meals; members of the Travelling community; and members of the Roma community. However, although that grabs headlines, the problem exists across our community.

It is vital that the Education Minister and the wider Executive pull together to deal with educational disadvantage. The Executive as a whole must address social disadvantage, but the Education Minister must target educational disadvantage. In recognising the educational underachievement of so many, we must accept the moral obligation that we have to tackle this inequity head on. Low educational achievement puts young people at severe disadvantage; it has adverse implications for employment levels and for our economic recovery.

It is important that the Assembly lend its full support to the North/South working group on educational underachievement. Educational

underachievement is not unique to the North: it is a concern across the island. We are falling short of the Programme for Government target that children should have five GCSEs by the time they leave school, irrespective of their background. Are we even using the right tools to measure educational achievement? I argue that we are not, but that is a debate for another day.

A child's development hinges to a large degree on the quality of early childhood education. The Department of Education must invest more in early years learning — children aged nought-to-seven. That could help us to tackle poor rates of literacy and numeracy. There has to be greater linkage between the Departments of Health and Education. Up to 30% of our early years children are presenting to nursery with language acquisition problems. In many cases, early intervention is just not happening. It can take years to acknowledge that your child has a learning difficulty, never mind to get anything done.

I visited a young mum yesterday whose two-year-old is having developmental difficulties. It has taken that mum six months to get an appointment with a child development clinic. The child has received only 45 minutes of speech therapy since Christmas; he has had only one appointment with the occupational therapist (OT) since Christmas. You do not have to be an educationalist to realise how detrimental a six-month delay is in the life of that young child. I ask you, Minister, and the senior officials of your Department, whether you would tolerate that if it was your child? Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Last week, we learned that a proper eye test for P1s has an effect on tackling underachievement due to the work of Michael Gilsenan.

It is widely recognised that an important centre of early education is home experience. I recognise that many parents need help with parenting. I have witnessed some excellent parenting programmes through Sure Start, but such programmes need to be more widely available. Developing everyone's learning and thinking ability (DELTA) is another great programme that many schools use.

Northern Ireland's global educational position in literacy and numeracy has been falling; that is an indictment on our society, and the Assembly must address it. Our society can benefit enormously from tackling underachievement, which is caused by many factors. I welcome the additional teachers at Key Stages 2 and 3. Some may call that "fire-fighting", but we need

to identify clearly why our young people are underachieving and implement a strategy to address educational disadvantage, irrespective of where it comes from.

We must invest in our children if we are to build a successful economy.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the opportunity to debate this important issue today. It is totally unacceptable for report after report to highlight the academic underachievement of Protestant boys who live in working-class communities, yet no specific policies are being brought forward that are aimed at resolving the issues.

Given the pitiful statistics, which have been repeated by other contributors, as academic year follows academic year, more and more of our children continue to be failed. The failure to get to grips with this issue and to help children in Northern Ireland in future is a prime example of the underachievement of successive Education Ministers.

The third peace monitoring report by the Community Relations Council, which was published on 3 April, provoked a flurry of commentary in the media. The Minister of Education rushed out a press release that day, admitting that the council:

"has not yet provided me with a copy of the report".

Despite being asked in the House last Tuesday at Question Time about the report, the Minister repeated the mantra that the cause of educational disadvantage was academic selection, again blaming unionists for championing its retention. He went on to talk about doing away with and eradicating academic selection. Let us be clear: the Minister's obsession with eradicating academic selection and, therefore, the grammar schools, is wrong, short-sighted and impossible.

To continue the blame game towards unionists and grammar schools for educational underachievement and yet fail to bring forward specific policies is something that cannot be allowed to continue. The arbitrary decision in 2002, just before the suspension of Stormont, to end the 11-plus examination with nothing to replace it as a means of transferring pupils to the most suitable post-primary schools has had incredibly negative repercussions that continue to be felt today.

If social equality based on exam results in all sectors of post-primary education is worse now,

the blame lies with Sinn Féin. All it has succeeded in doing is to effectively franchise out and privatise transfer testing, which has made it harder for children from working-class backgrounds to secure a grammar school place. Like others, the Ulster Unionist Party was not a fan of the former 11-plus test, but it was a better and fairer method of transferring primary-school pupils than the unregulated test that is now the norm.

It is depressing that, after all this time and numerous reports, all that the Minister of Education can come up with is the mantra "eradicate academic selection". This is a problem, however, that is not confined to inner-city Belfast. I would like to bring to the attention of the House and read into the official record some statistics from my constituency that have recently been released to me. In the last year with available statistics, just seven, or 13.5%, of the 52 Protestant boys who are resident in Upper Bann and who are entitled to free school meals left school with at least five GCSEs between A* and C, including English and maths. This is lower than the Northern Ireland average of 19.7% for all boys from Protestant backgrounds. Again, in geographic areas that are designated as deprived through official multiple measures, Protestants are less likely to have a level 2 and above qualification compared with Catholics in Upper Bann. The proportion of Protestants from deprived areas enrolling in further education is lower, at 27% of all Protestant enrolment, compared with 61% of Catholics.

These figures clearly demonstrate that, by the time these young people come to the end of their formal schooldays, the damage has been done. The Department for Employment and Learning is picking up the pieces of failings presided over by the Department of Education. Shockingly, the children who were in primary 7 in 1999, when Sinn Féin took over education, are now 24 years old. If they came from a working-class Protestant background, they are more likely —

4.00 pm

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

Mrs Dobson: — to have been failed by the system. At Question Time after Question Time, the Department and the Minister blame others.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Steven Agnew. The Member has a maximum of three minutes.

Mr Agnew: First, I will declare an interest as a director of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education.

We must base our education policy on evidence where it is available across the board. I think that the evidence that continually comes forward shows the underachievement of Protestant boys who are on free schools meals, but it still leaves many questions for which we need evidence to answer. How much of it is to do with community background and culture, and how much is to do with the institutions that Protestant working-class boys attend? For example, have we tracked the Protestant working-class boys who go to Catholic maintained schools or integrated schools and looked at how their performance compares with that of their counterparts in controlled schools? The case is equally so with the different categories. How much is it about the institutions? Are the institutions failing our children? Is the controlled sector failing them, or is it something that is particular to Protestant working-class boys?

There is no doubt that the evidence on free school meals shows that socio-economics are huge factors in achievement and outcomes for children. For that reason, there is merit in the amendment, although I think that, given the evidence, taking the focus off Protestant working-class boys is perhaps a mistake.

One piece of evidence that is ignored time and again in each of these debates is that on early years. That shows that disadvantage has already set in by the time that children reach school and that it is very difficult to turn around that disadvantage even by the time the child enters preschool. In fact, Professor Heckman's research shows that investing in early years will produce a much better return for the money that we spend and in the outcomes for those children. That is why, for example, although the common funding formula's intention of redirecting money to schools where there is greater disadvantage seems good on the surface, there is a question about whether it will yield results. That is why I think that it is much more urgent for us to establish an Executive-wide early years strategy that sees collaboration between the Department of Education and the Department of Health in particular. That will ensure that we tackle social disadvantage at the earliest stages —

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

Mr Agnew: — of a child's life.

The one other thing that I want to put on record is a call to the Minister to look at the single-named contact for every child, which has been introduced in Scotland. That could be a huge step in tackling disadvantage.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáilte roimh an tuairisc úr ón Chomhairle um Chaidreamh Pobail agus roimh an díospóireacht a chruthaigh sí.

I welcome the Community Relations Council's (CRC) recent report, the debate that it has generated and, indeed, today's debate. As Minister, my clear priority is to create an education service that ensures that everyone receives a high-quality education and in which all our young people are supported to reach their full potential. However, I acknowledge that, at the moment, the levels of inequality in our system remain unacceptably high. We have too many young people who are underachieving, and I am determined to do all that I can to tackle that.

Using my Department's data, the CRC report highlighted that, in 2011-12, 80% of male Protestant school leavers failed to achieve five or more GCSEs at A* to C, including English and maths. That was also the case for 67% of the Catholic boys who are entitled to free school meals.

As the motion notes, the peace monitoring report reiterates the conclusions of other reports and international studies by saying that social disadvantage has an adverse impact on educational outcomes. There remain parties in the Chamber who refuse to accept that internationally found conclusion. The evidence shows that disadvantage has a stronger impact than gender or religion alone and that the link between underachievement and socio-economic background is stronger here than in many other countries.

In 2012, 34% of school leavers with free school meals entitlement achieved five or more GCSEs at A* to C or the equivalent, including English and maths, compared with 68% of leavers who were not entitled to free school meals. Those pupils are twice as likely to achieve that outcome as their more deprived peers.

International and local evidence highlights a key equity challenge in our post-primary education system. In response to those reports and studies, I have emphasised my determination to take action to address that inequality and break the link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will give way in a moment. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have greater obstacles to overcome, and their schools need additional resources to help them to do that. In March this year, I announced changes to the way in which schools are funded in order to target additional resources at schools that serve higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils. I will give way to the Member.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. It is not that we do not recognise that there is an issue; we disagree with the Minister about the methods that he has used to try to address the problem. Can he tell the House today what educational advantage has been secured and what benefit there has been educationally for children who have been the recipients of free school meals since the introduction of that entitlement as the sole indicator of deprivation and, therefore, the sole arbiter of the allocation of funding?

Mr O'Dowd: Well, I think that the Member would accept — even my greatest critic would accept — that, because I introduced the changes in March and today is 6 May, we have to allow those changes to bed in. It is also clear that, despite the challenges that we face in the education system, the educational attainment of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, as targeted under free school meals entitlement, is rising. It is not rising quickly enough. Although the disparity between those who have free school meals entitlement and those who have not is still far too wide, there is a rise in their educational attainment.

As for extra funding that is awarded to schools, due to their higher pupil numbers, maintained secondary schools receive more funding, in aggregate, than controlled secondary schools but, on a per capita basis, controlled secondary school pupils receive more to help them to address educational underachievement.

I remain determined to tackle educational underachievement wherever it exists. I have continued to implement policies and provide funding for a range of additional interventions. Those policies focus on the factors that international evidence and best practice tell us will improve outcomes: effective school leadership, high-quality teaching and learning, and parental and community involvement. Equally important is providing access to a wide range of academic and vocational courses.

Young people who see their time in education as relevant to their future, have access to courses that interest and motivate them, and receive effective and timely careers guidance are more likely to remain engaged with their education and achieve their full potential. Full implementation of the entitlement framework is important for all young people. I disagree with Mr Kinahan's point that the entitlement framework is far too broad. I believe that it allows young people opportunity of choice in educational subjects.

I have also provided funding for a range of additional interventions that will support the Executive's aim of breaking the cycle of deprivation. I have earmarked £2 million in both 2013-14 and 2014-15 for a programme of community education initiatives to address the high levels of educational under-attainment experienced in areas of social and educational deprivation.

Substantial resources are also targeted at disadvantaged communities and aimed at improving school/community links through programmes such as Sure Start, on which we are spending around £25 million per annum; extended schools, on which we are spending £12 million per annum; the Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry programmes; and the west Belfast community project, which covers all areas of west Belfast. The Education Works advertising campaign, which was launched in September 2012, aims to inform and engage all parents, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to become more involved in their children's education.

As a result of my and my predecessor's policies, there have been improvements in outcomes at all key stages. However, despite that improvement, the gap between those from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds and other pupils remains unacceptably high, and, yes, the use of academic selection contributes to the maintenance of that gap.

International evidence — not that of John O'Dowd, Sinn Féin or the Department of Education — shows that the most successful education systems are those with the lowest differential outcomes between the highest and lowest achievers. However, as highlighted in the Community Relations Council report, the division into grammar and non-grammar schools here facilitates a form of social segregation. Academic selection is not in any way compatible with the Executive's priorities for tackling disadvantage, building strong and shared communities and growing a sustainable economy. The continued use of academic

selection by grammar schools is a barrier to addressing underachievement in disadvantaged areas. It damages children's confidence, their motivation to learn, and it lowers their expectations of themselves, contributing to the high levels of underachievement that we are seeking to tackle.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will give way in a second. That is why academic selection needs to end now, whether it is at the age of 11 or under the Dickson plan. If anyone needs evidence that the Dickson plan, as currently formatted, needs to come to an end, they should listen to the figures that Jo-Anne Dobson read out in the Chamber this afternoon. Mrs Dobson has been on the airwaves telling anyone who cares to listen that the Dickson plan is a world-class education system. Seven of the 50 Protestant working-class boys on free school meals entitlement achieved five good GCSEs. Mrs Dobson defends that system —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can all remarks be made through the Chair, please?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that that system is indefensible.

Mr Kinahan: Has the Minister has read and looked into the report by Professors Borooah and Knox? There is different evidence out there, and there are different ways of doing things. They have come up with a very clever idea of sharing.

Mr O'Dowd: I am not aware of the report that the Member refers to, but I am prepared to look at any evidence or any international best practice that is grounded in the educational well-being of all our young people.

It is clear that the research and evidence is there, and Mrs Dobson's figures today confirm it. We need to do things differently. The status quo is not serving all our young people the way that it should.

The motion calls on me to establish a sectoral support body for controlled schools. Let me make it clear that I have taken a very positive and proactive approach to establishing a controlled sector support body. That was to be an important and integral part of the agreement to establish ESA. There was a clear commitment set out in the heads of agreement in November 2011 to bring forward an Education Bill, and, within that, to establish

sectoral bodies for the controlled and Catholic sectors, which, I should add, I fully supported.

The Education Bill would have achieved parity of representation for all the sectoral interest groups, so that each would have had the same access to information and support that was available to all other sectors. Once Executive agreement to the Education Bill had been reached in 2012, I moved quickly to engage with the key sector representatives for the controlled sector. A working group was established in September 2012, with adequate funding to take forward and establish a sectoral body for the controlled sector.

Significant work was undertaken by the working group, with considerable progress made in designing an organisation structure and identifying a sectoral vision and values. I believe that all the preparatory work could have been completed by April 2015, which would have seen the establishment of a controlled sector support body, which would have seen significant improvement across the education sector.

As I stated earlier, the heads of agreement is an agreement to pass legislation that will establish ESA. Also contained within that is an agreement that extends to the need to establish two new sectoral bodies for the controlled and Catholic schools. The Education Bill, therefore, is a prerequisite to the Department fully funding a sectoral support body, with legal definition and functions set down in law.

Unfortunately, failure to make progress on the Bill and the establishment of ESA meant that work on establishing sectoral support bodies had to be discontinued. I regret the necessity to do that. However, it would not be appropriate for my Department to fund further expenditure on supporting parts of the heads of agreement while the principal part of the agreement — the establishment of ESA through the completion of the Education Bill — remains stalled. Indeed, I note that the former Finance Minister, Mr Wilson, was on the airwaves recently criticising me for preparing to invest for ESA. He questioned why I would even think that it was wise to spend money on preparing for ESA when there was no legislation passed in the Assembly. It is worth noting that during his three-year tenure as Finance Minister he never questioned why I was spending money on preparing for ESA but now appears to be very critical of the fact that I was spending money preparing for ESA. Part of that money was for preparing for the establishment of a sectoral support body.

4.15 pm

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just give me one second.

I very much regret that lack of progress in relation to the sectoral support body. That was not due to any lack of effort or desire to reach accommodation on any outstanding issues on my behalf. However, those efforts on my part have, unfortunately, not been returned. A consequence of the protracted delay is that the existing structures and the workforce have been held in a state of abeyance for far too long.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he clarify for the House, in case there is any confusion in the minds of Members, that the reason why the controlled sector body, as currently constituted, is unacceptable to the Transferor Representatives' Council and the controlled sector body itself is that the Minister and his party were unwilling to ensure that the issue of ownership was addressed adequately and that there was equality of treatment between it and the CCMS?

Mr O'Dowd: I return to the debate of November 2012. Not once throughout that lengthy debate on ESA, which lasted several hours, was that matter mentioned. In the heads of agreement, it is not mentioned either. I have honoured to the letter the heads of agreement in relation to ESA, and I brought forward all. The Member's party spent several years debating the needs of the voluntary sector. I dealt with its concerns, and all of a sudden it found a new problem. I have no doubt that if I deal with that problem, it will find a new problem. In fact, I know what the new problem is.

The education boards are in a depleted and unsustainable state and continue to operate at the extremities of corporate risk. While that is the case, the provision of key educational services lacks a sound basis. If that is not a sufficient reason to move towards ESA, local government reform is.

From 1 April 2015, if they have not been replaced by ESA, our education and library boards (ELBs) must be compatible with our new district council boundaries. Out of necessity, I have instructed my Department to take that forward and to cease work on ESA. Reconfiguring our ELBs to align with local government will involve legislation, will see a minimum of 170 schools change ELB and will see a significant proportion of the education workforce change employer.

If ESA had been in place for April 2015, local government reform would not have forced that nugatory, distracting and costly work upon the education administration. By contrast, ESA would have brought forward savings in the region of £185 million over 10 years. The controlled sectoral support body, which is called for in today's motion, would be ready to operate and would have had my and my Department's full support. However, in the absence of ESA, the controlled sectoral support body does not exist. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis chun labhairt ar an leasú seo. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the amendment.

A matter of factual accuracy is this: although a higher percentage of Protestant boys are underachieving in terms of achieving good outcomes at GCSE level, there is a higher number of Catholic boys. I feel quite uncomfortable discussing this issue in terms of religion. I do not see religion, in itself, as being a factor in educational underachievement. That is not the context, and a parent's religion is not the issue that we should be discussing.

I spoke recently to a principal from an integrated school. We had a general conversation, in which I asked where her pupils were drawn from. There were more or less equal numbers from Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, but there were also a lot of immigrant children. There were children from the Roma community and the Travelling community and some Somali children.

The difference in attitudes among the parents to education was interesting. The Community Relations Council report reflected the view that the children of Traveller and Roma families perform the least well of all groups. That was confirmed by the principal of the integrated school. In contrast, the parents of a Somali child brought the child to the principal and, in inarticulate English, said, "This is a doctor." They were saying, "Make a doctor out of this child." They wanted the best for their child; they wanted the child to have an education.

However, the common denominator in all of this educational underachievement is poverty and deprivation. It is a fact that poor kids are not intellectually less able than more affluent ones, but they face more obstacles. It may be that parents themselves do not understand the value of education, but why should children be penalised because of their parents' views? Neither should they be penalised because they have been born into poverty and deprivation.

The Minister has taken some steps to address this through his changes to the common funding formula. From this year on, more resources will be directed at kids from deprived backgrounds. All the research evidence shows that there is a clear link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement. Steven Agnew mentioned that, even in the early years, it is obvious that kids from deprived backgrounds are underachieving.

The research evidence also shows — and this is important — that schools with pupils from mixed socio-economic backgrounds do best. It is not just the poor performers who improve; top performers do also. It is a rising tide that floats all boats.

Poverty in itself does not mean that kids are going to underachieve. We all know of kids from poor backgrounds who do very well at school, but they face more obstacles, and there are other difficulties as well with underachievement. I have already mentioned parental influence, or lack of it, and there are other factors: lack of resources; academic selection, which favours the more well off; and good leadership in schools. All of those issues have to be addressed. They cannot be addressed simply by pouring more resources —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: No, I am sorry; I do not have much time left. The issue is this: as political leaders, we can all have an influence in changing attitudes towards education.

Just to conclude on the issue of the sectoral body, the Minister spoke at length about it, but Trevor Lunn summed it up.

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

Mr Sheehan: It was there in ESA; what is the problem? Explain what the problem is. I commend the amendment to the House.

Mr Newton: The motion recognises that the Community Relations Council's report reinforces the conclusion of other, similar reports. The motion recognises and:

"notes the positive action which the Minister of Education has taken to support other ethnic and minority groups"

and

"calls on the Minister of Education to outline the specific steps his Department is taking to redress this situation"

and to establish a sectoral body for the controlled sector to enable the issues to be addressed. That is no more than other sectors have been awarded.

Let me first pay tribute to the many parents from working-class backgrounds who have invested in their children's education, and the many pupils from such backgrounds who have done extremely well and risen up the ranks to very senior positions.

A young person getting a job or a career opportunity should be the aim of everyone in this House. The foundations for future success need to be built on from a very early age, and providing good early-years education, ensuring parental involvement at primary schools and at secondary educational level, and giving our young people the opportunity to follow the pathway that they want, whether academic or vocational, is essential for their development.

We have good schools and committed teachers across Belfast and the other city areas, but sadly we also have children who are not realising their full potential.

All the information confirms that that is particularly true in working-class Protestant areas, and it is a problem that must be tackled. It took the Minister until eight minutes into his remarks to mention the Protestant working class, and yet, essentially, this is a problem of the Protestant working class. We need an action-based and focused strategy that will involve schools and parents and provide children with the opportunities to achieve the results that they need for success in life.

When looking at the problem, I was reminded of a research study by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies in the Institute of Education. It is based on cohort data and has been following more than 19,000 children from all over the UK since they were born in 2000-01. The study revealed that most of the seven-year-olds interviewed — they were from all backgrounds — were ambitious and that just over 80% hoped for a professional or managerial job, with girls more likely to pursue a professional career. The most popular jobs among seven-year-olds were teachers, scientists, hairdressers, sportsmen, police officers, artists, entertainers, animal carers, vets, doctors and builders. Those are not children without ambition; they are children with ambition to do well. We need to create a situation in which our children can do well, and

the Minister has a responsibility not to put impediments in their way.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: Yes, I am happy to give way.

Mr O'Dowd: I want to correct the record for the Member. I pointed out the stark figures for Protestant working-class males on page 2 of my speech, and I assure him that it did not take me eight minutes to get to the second page.

Mr Newton: Let me talk about the impediments. In my constituency, the Minister promised a brand new school and is building a brand new school. All the figures indicate that the school should have 14 classrooms. What is the Minister building? He is building a 12-classroom school. So it will open with two mobile classrooms in the playground, taking up, because it is an inner-city school, most of the playground and creating a situation in which the children will have to go out on to the street to move from one end of the school to the other. The case was made by the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) for a school with 14 classrooms. All the enrolment figures and projections suggested a 14-classroom school, and planning permission was gained for a 14-classroom school, yet we are building a 12-classroom school. What does that say to the children and parents in the area about the composite classes that need to be achieved for their education? That is an inner-city area that, from time to time, has problems of civil unrest.

I want to remind the Minister about another situation. The Shankill area has suffered much over the years, and educational underachievement has been focused on for many years. Jackie Redpath and my colleague William Humphrey have produced an exciting plan to tackle underachievement. They presented it to the Minister — it was some time ago — and they now await his response.

In two areas, the Minister has put an impediment in the way of Protestant children achieving their full potential. In the school that I mentioned, Victoria Park Primary School, there is a high level of parent participation and a very good parent-teacher association. The area is enthusiastic about its children. That school will be amalgamated with two other schools that were closed. You can understand the frustration of parents, teachers and staff in that situation, and you can well understand the frustration of the parents and teachers in the Shankill situation.

4.30 pm

The Minister made some interesting points. He acknowledged that there was educational underachievement and that he wanted to do something about it. It is a problem. However, his analysis is always to focus on his opinion that it is the fault of the grammar schools or academic selection. It is the fault of everybody and anybody, but it is not the fault of the Minister. It is not the fault of dogma or policies that come from a different perspective on educational levels than those I would be prepared to put forward.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. He is coming to the nub of the issue. This debate and subject matter should be about advancing progress in the educational underachievement of Protestant working-class boys. Unfortunately, there seems to be an ideological attack by the Minister and his party on academic selection every time the issue comes up rather than attempts to improve the lot of those boys.

Mr Newton: Obviously, Mr Campbell is a mind reader. I take the point that he makes, so I will skip over that. The Minister also makes a point about the Education Bill and ESA. As that was travelling its pathway, he knew about the DUP's objections and, particularly, those of the Chairman of the Committee. He knew about the ownership issue and the social and political background. To some extent, we were travelling down a pathway of almost political and educational blackmail. It was a case of, "Must have ESA, must have ESA, must have ESA". There was no solution but ESA, and he knew that that was not acceptable in its format.

It is regrettable that such a motion will divide the House. It is regrettable that the House is sending out the message that the educational underachievement of Protestants — Protestant boys, in particular — will divide the House.

At the heart of the debate, as Mr Storey outlined, is support for a CCMS-type structure. The debate is about other sectors of our educational community receiving support and wanting a level playing field, compared with what others have been able to achieve.

The first Member to speak from the Sinn Féin side was Maeve McLaughlin. Her speech was merely a defence of the Sinn Féin propaganda regarding ESA. When Fearghal McKinney got up, he asked what I thought —

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

Mr Newton: — were, from his side, challenging questions for the Minister. I do not believe that he got answers to any of the questions that he asked the Minister.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 40; Noes 41.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Maeve McLaughlin and Mr Sheehan

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Ms Claire Sugden, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Douglas and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly negatived.

4.45 pm

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the issues raised in the report produced by the Community Relations Council regarding the

underachievement at GCSE of Protestant working-class boys in receipt of free school meals; notes with concern that this reinforces the conclusions of other similar reports over a number of years; further notes the positive action which the Minister of Education has taken to support other ethnic and minority groups who are underachieving; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline the specific steps his Department is taking to redress this situation and establish a meaningful sectoral body for the controlled sector to enable it to address this issue in the same manner as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, which has been able to tackle underachievement in the maintained sector.

4.45 pm

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Preschool Provision: East Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mrs Cochrane: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to once again bring this issue to the House, and I thank the Minister for his attendance.

Preschool provision in east Belfast, and right across Northern Ireland, is a topic that causes much frustration. Through our constituency offices and in the media, we hear on an annual basis about the problems that parents face at the school gate, yet we have still not managed to resolve those issues. Every child deserves the best start in life, and, although preschool education is a non-compulsory phase, its benefits cannot be overstated.

Research has shown that children who attend high-quality preschool settings are better prepared for primary school and learn more quickly than those who do not. It also shows that children who have attended preschool are more sociable, confident and independent than their peers who have not. It is, therefore, imperative that we get the provision right, and that is why I have been campaigning on this issue for a long time.

I take this opportunity to welcome the fact that the Minister has listened in the past and that some steps have been made in the right direction. For instance, we now have a two-step process that ensures that children in their immediate preschool year get priority over those in the penultimate preschool year, and we have also got rid of the July/August criterion, which had distorted intakes in some settings. Also, through the preschool education expansion programme, more children are receiving education in nursery schools and classes, playgroups and private day nurseries that all follow current curriculum guidelines. I welcome all this. Unfortunately, however, it is still not enough. There are still children who have not been allocated a suitable preschool

place, and we must look at and address the reasons for that.

I have carried out some surveying across my constituency of East Belfast on this issue, and the message that is coming back to me is clear. Parents do not see preschool provision as childcare. It is the start of a child's formal educational pathway, and that is why parents take it so seriously.

One of the biggest issues raised is the resentment of the priority criterion for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. I understand the rationale for this criterion, and I agree that the application process should ensure that there is a high level of preschool participation by children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, I have gone to great lengths to try to explain that rationale to some of my aggrieved constituents. However, the current set-up, which was designed to support maximum participation from the disadvantaged group, now appears to give that group priority in choice of setting. We want all children, regardless of background, to have a fair and equitable chance of being allocated a place in their preferred setting. We must ensure that the system allows that to happen.

A simple analysis of preschool settings in east Belfast shows a lack of provision in the Dundonald area. That is having an adverse impact on provision in the BT4 and BT5 settings, which are actually better balanced when you look at the P1 intake there. Enrolment patterns show that parents are also continuing to choose nursery schools or units over and above playgroups. We must ask why.

Many parents have told me that they see controlled and maintained nursery settings as providing an enhanced educational experience compared with the places offered in the private and voluntary sector. Do not get me wrong; there are many excellent preschool providers in that sector, and, indeed, I championed the expansion of St Colmcille's, Ballyhackamore, for that very reason. However, the issue needs to be addressed if we are to encourage parents to choose those settings voluntarily instead of seeing them as a second-rate provision.

The 'Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland' report found that, at the start of primary school, there were no differences between children who received part-time or full-time provision. I would be interested to know whether there has been a study to assess whether there are any differences between those who attended a controlled or maintained

setting compared with those who attended a voluntary or private setting.

If all preschool places are of the same high quality, we need to get that message out to parents. If there are differences, we need to address them. For instance, I have heard it said that nursery teachers have had training to help them to pick up early learning difficulties such as those on the autism spectrum but that playgroup leaders have not. I do not know whether that is the case but, if it is, do we need more training of that nature for preschool providers? Could we be using newly qualified teachers in those playgroup settings? Would that be a realistic option and has the Minister assessed the implications of doing it?

Another key consideration by parents when applying for a preschool place is whether it is linked to or close to the primary school that their child will attend. Parents understand that young children can take a while to settle and, therefore, many want their child to transfer to P1, where possible, with the little friends they made at preschool because they know that that helps to smooth the transition. The Department recently removed the link in the admissions criteria between preschool and primary 1 to alleviate a particular concern that some parents had. Unfortunately, that created a different concern, with uncertainty of a place two years in a row in the areas of high demand.

I mentioned the anomaly in provision in Dundonald, where there are 211 primary 1 places across two schools, but only 108 nursery places. I appreciate that some places have been allocated in the private and voluntary sector, but approximately 20% of children in that area are still without a local place. Some have secured a place further down the road, but that has simply shifted the under-provision to the BT4 and BT5 areas. I am keen to know whether the Minister has plans to address that specific problem.

The application process is complex. I wonder whether the Minister has considered changing it to be more in line with the process for primary 1 enrolment. I say that because there has been a commitment to provide at least one year of preschool education for all who want it, and all children must be provided with a primary 1 place, so why not match the enrolment process? If that is not an option, we need to address the lack of information for parents in relation to the preschool application process, which is especially difficult for parents who are negotiating the system for the first time.

Many parents are not sure exactly when they need to apply for a place. Perhaps there is a role for health visitors in providing an information pack for parents, because they are a main point of contact for families at that time. With Christmas being such a busy period for parents, I always try to get information out to constituents, urging them to meet the January deadline. However, it is not just about getting the application in on time; it is about knowing the system well enough to make informed choices.

This year, I again have heard from parents who chose Greenwood as number one and Dundela number two. By the time they chose Belmont as number three, they had lost out on a place that they might have been allocated had they put Belmont as number one in the first place. Instead, someone further away was allocated that space.

This year, I even went as far as phoning all the settings in advance to find out when their open days were taking place and published that information for my constituents to encourage them to take the opportunity to visit the preschool providers in their area and ask questions about specific entrance criteria. Perhaps this is something that could be done centrally in future, or perhaps the criteria could be the same for all settings. That may be less confusing.

I have previously suggested a points-based application system, and I am keen to know whether the Minister has considered such an option. A system like that could even allow childcare locations to receive a weighting to try to address the concerns for working parents who may need a place where their daycare solution can do a pick-up or drop-off. I know that the Minister has, in the past, said that he is the Minister of Education and not a Minister for childcare. I agree with him on that point. However, children do need to be cared for outside their preschool slot and he does have a responsibility to ensure that the timing and location of sessions matches local need, which will include, of course, access to childcare.

Finally, I have no doubt that today we will be told that the number of children who have not been allocated a place is lower than in previous years. Although I do not want to dismiss the progress that has genuinely been made on this issue, I would like to raise one final issue of concern.

It appears that some working parents are choosing not to apply for a preschool place as they believe that it is a pointless exercise. They

have looked at the enrolment patterns for their local providers and realised that they are unlikely to be allocated a place for their child due to the admissions criteria. They know that they will be directed to another provider but that that will simply not work because of their childcare arrangements; for example, if their daycare provider does not offer a drop-off and pick-up service for a further-away provider and they simply cannot base their work on a 12.15 pm drop-off and a 2.45 pm pick-up. As a result, we have children missing out on a preschool experience simply because their parents did not actually apply for a place, and now they are also off the Department's radar.

Although today I am raising the issue specifically in relation to the provision problems in east Belfast, I know that it is a problem Province-wide. If we want our children to avail themselves of a high-quality preschool education, surely the best way to do so is to ensure that there are enough places to meet demand and that all those places are of high quality. I look forward to hearing from the Minister on any progress he has made since we last debated the issue.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for bringing this very important subject to the House tonight. I also thank the Minister for being here tonight, because I know that he was involved in a previous discussion about disadvantage in education.

I also thank the Member for raising a number of points that are crucial to the debate. I think we all recognise that the benefits of preschool provision in relation to children's development across the board are so important. It is widely accepted that high-quality provision makes such a positive impact on children's lives.

In 2012 the Minister came to the House and talked about the importance of high-quality provision. That is what we are talking about tonight. It is about high-quality provision but also about access. The Member mentioned her own office. Certainly, in my office in east Belfast we have parents contacting us about the difficulties that they find in getting access to provision. In fact, someone was in our office recently who was offered a place over in north Belfast. I think it is totally unacceptable to ask parents, who find it difficult enough coming to terms with day-to-day living, to bring their children to another part of Belfast.

For me, one of the difficulties is in those disadvantaged areas and communities. The previous debate was about those working class communities that find it hard to access good

provision and the importance of the parents and the wider community being involved in the provision. In east Belfast, I have been very encouraged by the community and voluntary sector's input to preschool provision. An organisation like Carew II, which has been involved there for a number of years — going right back to the 1960s, I think, before it changed its name — does excellent work. There is also the East Belfast Partnership.

It has been trying to enhance education from preschool provision through to people from those particularly disadvantaged areas getting access to higher-level education.

5.00 pm

I have spoken to people who are former members of the various boards, and they say that, although there has been provision for many years, we still have not cracked it. I ask the Minister to look again at the provision. I know that he has made certain changes — very positive changes. However, as the Member said, there are still problems with access and making sure that we have that high quality provision. I encourage the Minister to look at ways in which community and voluntary organisations can be more involved in that provision, because they need help and support if we are to encourage the development and increase high-quality provision in east Belfast. We are talking about east Belfast, but it is not just in east Belfast; it is right across the board.

I will leave it at that, but I want to reinforce to the Minister the fact that we need to look at this again, because there are difficulties that need to be addressed.

Mr Newton: Like Mr Douglas, I indicate my gratitude to Judith Cochrane. This is an important debate, coincidental though it may be that it came immediately after the debate on underachievement, particularly among young Protestant boys. It is important in the sense that we want to get the right start in life, the right conditions and the right support for our children. There is no doubt that parents definitely feel that getting a quality provision of preschool education is a very good foundation. They are particularly interested in getting a provision that will enable the child to transfer into the primary-school system and where the relationships that are built up can be maintained as they go into primary school. I thank Mrs Cochrane for proposing the debate. It is not the first time that we have debated the issue. We have debated it before and, hopefully, will not have to debate it next year. We will wait to hear

what the Minister has to say, but we hope that we will not need to debate it next year.

I am not going to go into the analysis, as the analysis of where it is was excellent. I just want to make a few points and build on a couple of things that Sammy Douglas said. Entrance criteria are a concern for parents. There is no doubt that seeking a place for a child is a very traumatic experience for the parent or parents. I am sure that we have all seen that when parents get a letter of refusal, maybe not just from one place but from several places, it raises the concern of parents who are seeking a place. Those parents are very responsible and are seeking the best start in life for their child, and it is very concerning to be rejected at that stage.

Mrs Cochrane referred to the statistics. If you look at them, you see that they are going in the right direction, and that is welcome. However, to some extent, that is only if you look at it with regard to statistics. There are parents who say, "Look, there is no point in my applying, because I do not have a connection with my local school", or, "I am working and my wife or partner is working, and there is no point in us applying." They then go off to look for alternative provision in the system. In doing so, they are not building a connection with their local school, and they are not developing the community as a whole. In the event of a second or third child coming along, the problems continue.

As Mr Douglas said, there is something inherently wrong when a parent in east Belfast is offered a place for their child in north Belfast, given the schools that are in east Belfast. By coincidence, I had to travel across Belfast this morning. Getting across Belfast in the morning to leave a child to school would be horrendous. I suggest that it would not be achievable to get there and then move on to work. Then, there is the potential of having to pick the child up at a later stage in the day.

The other thing is that local schools tend to have parental support or alternative support around them. There is no doubt that many, many parents rely on wider family to support them in the early years of their child's education.

Mrs Cochrane made a point, which Sammy Douglas reinforced, about the quality of provision. I think that we are certainly going in the right direction with quality of provision. The skills that we are developing and the facilities that are there are good. However, I want to put

to the Minister a situation that has arisen in east Belfast.

Orangefield Primary School is an excellent school serving its community extremely well. It faces high demand for places, and children, even those who live 100 metres or 100 yards from the school door, are being refused a place because they do not meet other aspects of the criteria. However, there is an opportunity, because in close proximity — one might argue that it is on the same campus — is Orangefield High School, which is going to close. There is an opportunity for the Minister to consider using Orangefield High School as the provision —

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

Mr Newton: — for preschool education.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First of all, I thank the Member Judith Cochrane for bringing this debate to the House this afternoon. She and other Members identified a range of benefits that accrue to young people and children when they get into the education system at the earliest opportunity, and those are very clearly understood by us all. Obviously, preschool provision forms part of that and is a very important aspect.

The Member indicated that she was pleased to be able to acknowledge that there have been improvements in the level of provision, particularly since last year. I share the concern that we all want to make sure that there is maximum reasonable access to preschool provision and that there cannot be any concept of second-rate provision. Therefore, I endorse any comments about, first of all, looking for access to preschool provision and first-class provision. I would not suggest that anybody is providing second-rate provision.

We all understand very clearly the benefits for children of getting into preschool education facilities as soon as they possibly can. As a long-time elected representative, I know that, year on year, we deal with families that have difficulties with getting their children into a preschool, a primary school or even a post-primary school. We are always addressing various criteria.

It is important to welcome the fact that improvements have been driven by the Minister and the Department. That is very important. I urge parents to continue working with local education boards and other providers, because

that is how these matters will be addressed locally in the first instance. I urge parents to work with the boards in the first instance to ensure that their children get an appropriate place.

There is no doubt that, over the years, we have dealt with the various criteria that have been laid out. Many people will argue about whether the criteria need to be changed. Of course, from time to time, they are changed. Obviously, we have criteria that are designed to tackle disadvantage. We try to tailor the criteria to make sure that we tackle other, more fundamental problems, such as children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. We know that they will suffer more because of the background that they come from and because of the obstacles that they will have to overcome when they enter the education field to get a level playing field.

It is another timely reminder to all of us that we have to continue to do our level best, collectively as an Assembly and Executive, to tackle disadvantage at source. The sooner we do that, the sooner we can reduce the need for criteria, whether they are for preschool education provision or any other social services provision required. It is a bit of a no-brainer: if we tackle disadvantage at source, we lessen the burden on every other aspect of our public services provision.

I commend the Minister and the Department for continuing to improve the scenario, but this is like everything else. We have an important improvement to record, and, clearly, most parents will have a satisfactory outcome, but we know that, for young families in particular, preschool provision for their child is the start of a journey through the education system. It would be far better for that journey to start on a positive than it being, in some cases, more negative than it should be.

I urge the Minister to take note of the concerns. I know that he is very concerned and that he has been taking important steps to address the issue year on year and will continue to do that. While acknowledging the important work and recent improvements in the service, I look forward to hearing his response to the concerns raised by Members.

I also commend the Member who secured the Adjournment debate. It has given Members the opportunity to address what is an ongoing issue for all families still trying to get their child a preschool place. We hear of such families, and although there are, thankfully, fewer of them, each individual case causes stress. So it is

important to acknowledge that improvements have been made, and we look forward to continuing improvement in preschool provision.

Mr Kinahan: I will be brief. I am pleased to be able to join in today's debate and thank Mrs Cochrane for securing it. I am intrigued that most of the complaints that came my way as Deputy Chair of the Education Committee were from the South Eastern Education and Library Board. I had very few from Belfast, so I congratulate the Minister, the Department and all those involved in the areas where the system works really well.

A constant review is needed throughout, but I want to use now as a chance to nudge people towards looking at the things that do not work well. There does not seem to be a good system for assessing what is needed for next year, or whether we need to look at this three years, two years or one year in advance to try to find a better way.

It was, I think, Mr Douglas who said that getting the community to work together and getting everyone to pull together was probably how we could find an economic and reasonably cheap way of doing this so that we are always ahead on the figures and can guess and help schools out.

It is also about trying to make sure that parents who both work have a chance to get their children to preschool. They are always the ones that seem to be left out. Then there are the problems of those who cannot manage the half day because they work for the whole day and do not have family or other support.

It goes back to the point that we need a good assessment system that looks at what is needed for next year and the year after that.

The Minister will never win, but he can keep doing his best. We will keep prodding and pushing him every year. Thank you to everyone and thanks for the debate. I think that this is like everything else here: it is about working together.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate. I recognise that Members have raised some genuine concerns. I recognise some of these concerns from my postbag of correspondence from MLAs, councillors and, most importantly, parents.

Before I turn to specific points of East Belfast, it is worth pointing out that we are only at the

halfway point in the preschool application process. Across the North, 23,215 applications were submitted during stage 1 of this year's process, almost 700 more than last year. So far, over 95% of parents who applied have received the offer of a funded place in a setting nominated in their application form, and 86% have secured a place in their first preference.

Some of you acknowledged that that is a considerable achievement and represents real progress from the position only a few years ago.

The Department of Education invests over £87 million in non-compulsory early years education and learning services. Since March 2013, I have approved five development proposals, creating an additional 130 preschool places in addition to providing sufficient funding for education and library boards to secure sufficient places to meet the projected demand. I will keep this under review as the admissions process progresses.

5.15 pm

The preschool education advisory groups (PEAG) and the education and library boards are responsible for the detailed planning and management of the preschool admissions process within the framework set out by the Department. The process is detailed and time-consuming, and considerable effort has been made by staff in the boards and the PEAGs to identify suitable places for children.

Before I comment on the specific provision in the East Belfast constituency, I want to respond to a number of points raised during the debate. Members referred to the priority given to children from socially disadvantaged circumstances and to the needs of working parents. I must be very clear that my focus is on the education of the child, and, as someone pointed out, I have already said that I am not the Minister with responsibility for childcare. However, I accept that these circumstances overlap.

My priority is to address the educational needs of the child. Attendance at preschool delivers positive outcomes later in life. Indeed, the previous debate looked at the needs of Protestant working-class boys in particular and at challenging their educational outcomes. Preschool provision for people from socially deprived backgrounds is vital. However, it is important to point out that, in reality, less than 24% of children receive priority because of social disadvantage. We often believe that

there is a blockage for everyone trying to get to their preferred point, but that is not so.

At the end of stage 1 of the admissions process, 95% of children have already received the offer of a funded place. The debate has also raised the issue of children from lower-income working households, and it has been suggested that those children may benefit from priority in the application process. However, the review of preschool admissions recommended that the definition of "socially disadvantaged circumstances" be examined, with a view to monitoring the relevant economic elements of the definition of free school meal entitlement for that reason. This area will be reviewed, and I want to ensure that a fair and transparent process remains in order to ensure that those children who are most at risk of educational underachievement are encouraged and supported from the outset.

Before I turn to the specifics of east Belfast, I want to mention the letter that the boards sent out during the application process. If people have been turned down, they will receive a list of all providers in the board area. I agree: I do not think that it is reasonable to ask anyone to travel across Belfast or to travel long distances to a preschool provider, but the boards are sending out letters that set out all the providers in the area. From an administrative and financial point of view, it is much easier to do that, but I accept the frustration of parents when they receive letters suggesting that they move further afield. However, we are not asking parents to travel too far. What we are asking parents to do is to continue to engage and work with the boards through this process in order that they will be placed.

I will return to the specific issues. Parents in east Belfast submitted 1,208 first-preference applications. Both the Belfast and South Eastern Education and Library Boards manage the preschool education programme there and, at the end of stage 1 of the process, 120 children remained unplaced locally. Places remain available, and the PEAGs have already introduced some 90 additional places into the east Belfast area, with over 100 places available for stage 2. Lough View Nursery, in neighbouring Castlereagh, also requested and has been granted temporary flexibility to increase uptake from 26 to 30 places for the 2014-15 school year. It is worth noting that none of the nursery schools in east Belfast has asked for a temporary variation, which is available on request. That can increase numbers by four, which, I accept, is a small number, but for health and safety reasons, that is as far as we believe that we can go.

However, none of the nursery schools in the east Belfast area has asked for that extension.

Officials from my Department will liaise with PEAG colleagues regularly to review the situation and to ensure that suitable places can be identified for all children. The publication in October last year of Learning to Learn, my framework for early years education and learning, highlighted the importance of quality education and learning.

I am keen to build on the significant progress that has been made in recent years. I am conscious that Members are being contacted by parents who have genuine concerns about provision in the east Belfast area. I will ask my colleagues in the Department to liaise closely with the PEAGs for the area and, where additional places are required and there are no additional places within a reasonable travelling distance, we will provide them.

I want to ensure that every family and every child has an opportunity to receive preschool education, which may or may not be in a nursery school; I noted the comments about the comparison of the quality of education in nursery schools compared with community and voluntary settings. Both settings are regularly inspected by the inspectorate; they teach the same curriculum and are open to the same challenges from my inspectorate that they would if they were a statutory school. Through our Learning to Learn programme, we are running a pilot scheme in some of the community and voluntary settings to identify special educational needs etc. There is a recognition that there will always be a need for upskilling, and we are working through that upskilling programme. I believe that a well-run and well-managed community and voluntary setting offers a child the same advantages in life as a well-run, well-managed nursery school.

Mr Douglas: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Judith asked me first.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for giving way. I agree with him, but how do we get that message out? How do we challenge the perception among parents that, somehow, it is second-rate? I was not suggesting that it necessarily was, but there is work to be done to smooth the process.

Mr O'Dowd: I will answer that point, and then I will let Sammy in. There is a message to be sent out to parents to instil confidence in them that a preschool setting outside a school will

offer the same opportunities to a child that a setting in a school would provide. I have challenged some of the groups at times. When you look at the provision of a nursery school, or there is a banner outside saying "playgroup", that automatically sends a message to parents that, I think, is negative. These are preschool settings and children learn through play — I am not arguing against the concept of learning through play or through the existing curriculum — but there is also a role for community and voluntary settings to sell themselves and present themselves in a different way.

I will let Sammy in, and then you can come back to me.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for letting me intervene. You mentioned some of the great work that the community and voluntary sectors are doing. My colleague Danny Kinahan also talked about a community response. Would you agree that the social enterprise model is a very good model for community and voluntary organisations in which people from voluntary organisations can get together and run schemes as highly professional businesses? Have there been any discussions between your Department, the boards and, for example, Invest Northern Ireland about trying to increase some of that provision through social enterprises?

Mr O'Dowd: There have been no specific discussions between my Department, the boards and Invest NI on that matter. The Member will accept that my primary responsibility is the provision of preschool education, but I acknowledge the fact that I am spending public funds, which can stimulate the economy in many different ways. There is clear evidence that where there are well-run community and voluntary settings we are making an impact, not only on children's lives but on the socio-economic character of communities. I am a great supporter of community and voluntary interventions in areas because they make a community stronger.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for letting me come in again. I want to go back to the point about challenging the perceptions around the difference between a playgroup and a nursery. Those perceptions go right down to the booklet that is produced by the education and library boards, which separates them out and puts the playgroups at the back of the book. If they were integrated throughout the book, that, perhaps, might go some way towards challenging those perceptions.

Mr O'Dowd: I will certainly ask my officials to take a note of that. When you do things such as that, it perhaps sends the wrong message to parents about the quality of education offered in these settings. I will follow that up with the education and library boards and encourage them to approach that in a different way.

I assure Members who represent East Belfast and adjoining areas that we will keep the situation under review and that we are still involved in the process. The message that has to go out is that we should encourage parents to continue to engage with the education and library boards. We will do everything in our power to ensure that there is local provision in east Belfast or in the closest geographical areas.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for giving way. I want to raise the point again about the potential use of the Orangefield campus for a facility that would address some of the oversubscription in the area.

Mr O'Dowd: I had taken a note of that; I apologise to the Member for not responding to him. The Orangefield High School site is owned by the Belfast Education and Library Board. It is its responsibility to find an alternative use for it if it wishes to keep it in the education sector.

I ask the Member to raise that with the Belfast Board. I will certainly ensure that a note is passed to it to state that that issue was raised during the debate and that providing preschool education on that site may be one of the areas that it wants to look into in the future. Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am finished speaking.

Adjourned at 5.25 pm.



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