

# Official Report (Hansard)

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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.  
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: [simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk)

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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 25 March 2014

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Executive Committee Business

### Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill: Further Consideration Stage

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Minister for Social Development to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill.

*Moved. — [Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development).]*

**Mr Speaker:** As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

## Private Members' Business

### Sporting Facilities for People with Disabilities and Special Needs

**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 McMullan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the lack of sporting facilities for people with special needs and disabilities; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Minister of the Environment and local authorities to work with Disability Sports NI and Sport NI to carry out comprehensive research to evaluate the existence and suitability of sporting facilities in all the new local council areas.*

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Today's motion is all about the lack of sporting facilities for the disabled, both indoor and outdoor. At present, approximately 360,000 of our population are considered to have a long-term illness, which is used as a working definition of disability. With those figures, you would expect sports facilities to be able to cope with the number of disabled people, but that could not be further from the truth.

At present, people with a disability exercise a lot less than those without, with just 12% participating regularly in sporting competitions. That figure indicates the problem. Although access to sporting facilities has improved because of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, considerably less has been done to facilities to meet the actual sporting requirements of people with disabilities. For those with a disability, sport is a means of communication, a means of socialising and, most importantly, a means of improving health. However, the barriers are still there. The barriers to participation were highlighted in an academic study in 'Sport Management Review', which stated that, in a sporting context, people with a disability often faced a multitude of barriers to participation and achievement in sport. While other marginalised groups in the population have received attention in sport, those with disabilities have received very little. The authors of the study stated that people with a disability faced five common barriers when they attempted to access sport: a lack of understanding of how to include people with a disability in sport; limited opportunities and programmes for participation, training and competition; lack of accessible facilities; limited accessibility to transportation; and limited access to information and resources.

A further barrier was identified in Sport NI's 2010 survey 'The Coaching Workforce', which found that 65% of sports coaches did not work with people with a disability, which is a shocking figure. Who is doing the coaching? Quite often, it is volunteers. When we research sports facilities for people with a disability, we

find more and more barriers that make participation in sport for those people very difficult and sometimes practically impossible.

Where has it all gone wrong? Sport NI, in conjunction with Disability Sports NI, developed the access guidelines 'Access to Sports Facilities for People with Disabilities: Design and Management Guidelines'. Those guidelines provide detailed guidance and advice on design, management and sport development plans, but Disability Sports NI states that no comprehensive research has been carried out to evaluate the suitability of facilities for disability sports. How do those facilities get away with that?

Disability Sports NI runs an inclusive sports facility accreditation scheme. It is a way for Disability Sports NI to validate and recognise the achievement of sports and leisure facilities that are fully inclusive to people with disabilities participating in their chosen sport. The scheme was to be and should have been a golden chance for councils to sign up and set out their stall that they are there for people with disabilities, but, unfortunately, the majority did not even bother to register. One council is accredited with the scheme, six are under assessment, and 19 did not bother to register. That is sad, considering that council facilities are the main destination for those who participate in any sport.

When the Assembly debated my motion in November 2012, we congratulated our successful athletes in the 2012 Paralympic Games. We agreed that councils should increase the number of sporting opportunities available to people with disabilities at all levels of sport in every area. If we have called on all councils to increase their sporting opportunities for the disabled but councils have neither improved facilities nor even bothered to register — 19 did not — for a scheme to improve their facilities that would have led to improved sport, we have a major problem. It was all to have been done voluntarily, but I believe that we may now have to look at a compulsory review of facilities. If we have left it to councils to do that voluntarily and they have not bothered, we have to go down a different route. The European Convention on Human Rights states that people with disabilities have to be given the same rights and services as able-bodied people.

Our Special Olympics athletes continue to achieve greatness on the athletics field and in all the other sports related to their degree of disability. Disability Sports NI has provided an ongoing service since 1997 and represents around 20,000 adults and children each year.

We admire sports groups and all the athletes involved and their achievements, but sports facilities have not kept up with the demand from those with disabilities. That is the reason for today's motion. In my area of the glens, for example, children who have the honour of being picked for the Irish Special Olympics team or the Ulster Special Olympics team have a round trip of 80 miles each day to train in the Antrim Forum. What is wrong with the buildings close by? They have just not bothered to put in place the facilities that they could have done, if they had been really interested. We put those children on a bus for an 80-mile round trip: we should be ashamed of ourselves.

With RPA coming in about 12 weeks' time, the new councils have an opportunity to put together their facilities for the disabled. Councils have a responsibility. For example, we have beaches for outdoor sports. Inland Waterways has kept pace and been exemplary in catering for disability sports and inland fishing on waterways and rivers. However, the lack of access to beaches, piers and jetties belonging to councils denies those who are disabled the right to participate in sea fishing, which is a big sport. We cannot even do that. I do not think that these people are really interested. So, today, I call for a compulsory review of all sports facilities. That includes all council facilities, because they get subsidies and help. We are now moving to a bigger council model — we had 26; I think we are down to 11 — so surely that will be easier to manage. We need to do that and do it now.

We need a Charter Mark for councils so that anybody who is disabled and wants to know where to participate in sport can go online and check out whether the new councils are up to standard and can cater for their sport. As I said, if we do not make this compulsory, it will never happen. We will go through the debate today, but nothing will be put in place. The transition committees are going through what should be in the new councils. If today's motion is successful, it should feed back into the transition committees of all the councils. This cannot carry on any longer. The way that people with disabilities are treated is an absolute disgrace. They should get the same treatment as able-bodied people. I hope that the Assembly supports the motion. Let us take this forward. We are here to speak for those who are not able to speak for themselves. At the very least, let us give them the same facilities as we, as able-bodied people, enjoy.

**Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):** As

Chairperson, I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate.

The Committee recognises the many benefits to our health and well-being of participating in sport and physical recreation. That is why it is important that opportunities to participate in sport are readily available and accessible to all. The most important legacy from the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was the increase in the number of people wishing to participate in sport. In the immediate aftermath of the games, the Committee heard from Disability Sports NI about the increased demand from people with disabilities. However, recent statistics show that disabled people are still half as likely to get involved as someone who does not have a disability. Given that 20% of the population — one in five — is considered to have a disability, that is a worrying statistic, as highlighted by the proposer of the motion.

#### 10.45 am

It is recognised that many barriers prevent people with special needs and disabilities from taking part in sport, including the economic, attitudinal and physical. It is incumbent on the Executive, Assembly and local authorities to do everything in their power to overcome those hurdles. The Committee is aware that much has already been done; however, there is still work to do. Research has shown that, although basic physical access to sports facilities has improved in response to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, less has been done to meet the sporting requirements of people with disabilities. Disability Sports NI's inclusive sports facility accreditation scheme is a mechanism to validate and recognise the achievement of sport and leisure facilities that are fully inclusive of people with disabilities participating in sport. However, as Mr McMullan said, it is disappointing that only one council is accredited and just a further six are under assessment. The reform of local government provides an opportunity to refocus our efforts and to properly address issues around barriers to participation. This requires an assessment of our current sporting facilities, and, by undertaking that evaluation, all partners can move forward and prioritise the areas most in need of attention.

In October 2012, the Committee received a briefing from Disability Sports NI on its plans to develop a six-year strategic plan to increase disabled people's participation in sport. The Committee wrote to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) to ascertain what measures could be taken to encourage local government to engage with Disability

Sports NI and to encourage increased participation in sport among disabled people. NILGA acknowledged that, while present arrangements could be improved, it required the pooling of resources and investment partnership between central and local government and Disability Sports NI. A partnership approach is key to delivering better facilities for our sportspeople with special needs and disabilities.

The Committee recognises that our council facilities are foremost for many people in accessing sport. However, with significant public investment in the redevelopment of Ravenhill, Windsor Park and Casement Park, the Committee encouraged Disability Sports NI to liaise with the appropriate governing bodies regarding disability access at those stadiums. The Committee welcomes Disability Sports NI's inclusion on a group designed to specifically focus on inclusion and disabled access across these stadiums.

The Committee is also aware of the Minister's priority in promoting equality and tackling exclusion and poverty. Programme funding of £4.5 million over three years was distributed across the three main sport governing bodies to implement sport programmes specifically designed to promote inclusion. The Committee was impressed with the work of each of the governing bodies in this area — for example, Ulster Rugby's tag rugby programme, which is for those with learning difficulties. The Committee is keen to hear the Minister's longer-term plans for this funding, which is due to expire in 2015, including whether it will be extended to other sports.

The remit of the Department allows for opportunities of inclusion and participation, whether through sports, libraries or the arts, thus improving our mental health and well-being. Therefore, it is encouraging to know that the Arts Council proposes to establish a working group, with other DCAL arm's-length bodies, around the possibility of conducting a mapping exercise to better understand the barriers —

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

**Miss M McIlveen:** — across access and participation encountered by those with disabilities. The Committee is interested in moving forward the development and work of this group. The Committee will also adopt its scrutiny and advisory role as DCAL moves forward with its draft disability action plan. Mr

Speaker, I apologise for overrunning. I support the motion.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I speak in support of the motion. The debate gives us an important opportunity to identify the suitability of sporting facilities that can provide a space for people with special needs and disabilities to reach their sporting potential. For too long, people with special needs and disabilities have been placed at a disadvantage when it comes to the provision of sporting facilities in their local community. Today, it is time to rectify that inadequate state of affairs.

It is imperative that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Minister of the Environment work in a collaborative manner with Disability Sports NI and Sport NI to pinpoint the suitability of sporting facilities in all the new council areas. Forward planning is required so that the very best sites can be identified. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the excellent work of members of the community, voluntary and statutory organisations and the health and social care professions who support those with special needs and disabilities, as well as their families.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I thank the Member for giving way. Like the Chair of the Committee, I think that it is important to recognise that, with the Local Government Bill going through the House, there are opportunities to set the standards and models of good practice that all councils should share and lead on to make sure that no one in our community, irrespective of whether they have a learning disability or another disability, should be marginalised.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with his comments.

I pay special tribute to Disability Sports NI, which is the key body responsible for the development of sport and physical recreation opportunities for people with physical, sensory and learning disabilities in Northern Ireland. Disability Sports NI is committed to the principle that every person with a disability has the right to participate in all aspects of society. People with disabilities in Northern Ireland want to participate in sport for the same reasons as everyone else: to lead a fit and healthy lifestyle; to gain a sense of achievement or challenge; to develop their natural sporting talent; or simply for the fun and enjoyment of taking part. They also have the right to participate in sports.

Although basic access to sporting facilities has improved significantly in recent years as a direct response to the introduction of part 3 of the Disability Discrimination Act in 2004, many sports facilities are unable to accommodate the needs of sportspeople with disabilities. That is an indictment of our society and is why we need to rectify the situation.

The Olympic and Paralympic Games were a tremendous vehicle for shifting attitudes towards the perception of disability in sports. We must build on that progress. Work must begin immediately to identify facilities that need improving or modifying to accommodate those with particular needs. We must now focus our efforts on achieving equality of opportunity for people with disabilities so that they can take part in their sport and physical recreation at a level of their choice. We must inspire and enable people with special needs and disabilities to live a full and active life through sport and physical recreation.

Just last month, we had the wonderful achievement of Kelly Gallagher, a County Down native, in the winter Paralympics in Sochi, and I will also mention Bethany Firth and Laurence McGivern from my constituency for their remarkable performances in the 2013 Paralympic Games and the IPC World Championships.

**Mr McGimpsey:** I also support the motion. Clearly, as has been stated, the principle is equality, and, irrespective of your colour, class, creed, gender or disability, you have the right to equal participation. Therefore, we need to look at the barriers to that.

A NISRA survey in 2007 found that 85% of people in Northern Ireland with disabilities never took part in any form of sport or physical recreation. That is a huge indictment of our society. Also, Disability Sports NI suggests that 30% of the entire population has a long-term limiting illness, so we have a very big need and there is clear demand. Participation can benefit people through improvement not just of their physical health but of their mental, emotional and psychological well-being. There are real health benefits to society and the individual through this type of participation in sport. It is about social inclusion and combating isolation and loneliness, which is one of the great scourges of our society and one of the reasons why, for example, 25% of our population suffers from mental illness. One of the key elements in that is social exclusion and isolation, and sport can address that, as can arts and cultural pursuits.



There are a number of reasons why we look for participation. It benefits the individual, and people can benefit from participation in clubs, societies and teams through teamwork, encouragement of positive attitudes and support. As the motion says, we must look at the need and then work out how we address it. There is a clear need here, but we also have to focus further down from the NISRA survey of 2007 and the work of Disability Sports, which does tremendous work. We must look at the need, assess it and work out how to address it.

**Mr Dallat:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McGimpsey:** I will give way, yes.

**Mr Dallat:** Does the Member agree that, in assessing need, there needs to be a follow-up by the clubs or organisations that, very often, draw down millions of pounds of public money but have no programmes in place to find people with a disability and encourage them to use the facilities?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute on his time.

**Mr McGimpsey:** I thank Mr Dallat for that intervention, and I agree with him entirely. That is an issue about policy. The Department and the Minister must lay down a policy so that, wherever the cash flows to address need, there is follow-up and assessment to ensure that the money goes where we want it to go, according to the objectives of the plan.

We are at the beginning of another step, but we have made great progress. We have only to look at the rising demand and the achievements of our elite athletes in sports that we do not associate with Northern Ireland, such as downhill skiing. That gives us an idea of the demand. The more the elite athletes achieve, the greater the demand, because it spurs demand. That is good and beneficial to us all, but we must look to address that need. That is why the motion gets to the point: we need to assess that need, after which we can decide, according to policy and resources, what we will do about it.

**Ms Lo:** I support the motion. I recall the debate in November last year on the legacy of the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. It was said then that we needed to create a genuine, lasting legacy from the games. After the huge successes of Kelly Gallagher, our gold medallist at this year's Winter Paralympics in Sochi of whom we are all very proud, preserving this legacy is all the more important. Arthur

Williams, the Paralympic cyclist and commentator, said at the close of the Paralympics:

*"Our mission was to create a public that is at ease and comfortable with disability and I think we've achieved that. An able-bodied person is never going to look at a disabled person the same way ever again."*

Kelly Gallagher is an inspiration to us all, particularly to young people with disabilities.

Although there are policies and strategies, such as Sport Matters, the DCAL inquiry into sport and physical activity and the Sport NI disability action plan, the question remains of whether we are doing enough. Nineteen per cent of people with disabilities participate in physical activity, compared with 37% of non-disabled adults. That means that people with a disability are only half as likely to participate in sport. How do we maximise the sporting potential of people with disabilities and special needs? I agree with Mr McGimpsey: it is important that people with disabilities be encouraged to take up sport.

One obvious way is to increase the scale of sport provision across Northern Ireland. Given modest funding, that is difficult to achieve by relying only on support from Sport NI and DCAL. The creation of the 11 new district councils provides an excellent opportunity to ensure that we do all that we can to increase participation in sport by people with disabilities. The community planning provisions in the Local Government Bill will, no doubt, help with that. However, simply evaluating current facilities does not go far enough; we must also see actions and results.

That is why Alliance tabled a number of amendments to strengthen community planning in the Local Government Bill. Alliance has successfully amended the Bill to make outcomes achieved part of the councils' two-year progress report on their community plans. Another of our amendments is that, when identifying actions, councils must specifically include actions and functions to the planning, provision and improvement of public services. We also improved the Bill to ensure that councils actively seek the engagement of consultees. We believe that all those provisions will assist in providing better sporting facilities for people with disabilities and special needs.

**11.00 am**

In February last year, the House debated a motion on grass-root and elite sports facilities. It was mentioned then that the Sport Matters strategy had a target of creating or upgrading 10 facilities by 2014. I would be interested to see whether that target was achieved and, where facilities were upgraded, whether provision for those with disabilities was taken into account.

Our sportspeople, especially those with special needs and disabilities, should not be disadvantaged by lack of access, but lack of funding should not be a problem either. Is enough money being invested in our sportspeople with disabilities and special needs? Conducting an audit of sports facilities would certainly help to identify what areas are delivering —

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

**Ms Lo:** — for those with special needs and how best to improve those facilities that fall below the desired standard.

**Mr Hilditch:** I support the motion. It is a motion that few, if any, in the Assembly would oppose, particularly given our recent successes at various levels of Special Olympics through to the elite sections of the Summer and Winter Paralympics.

It was not that long ago, as Ms Lo said — probably about a year ago — that we debated a similar motion about elite facilities for sportsmen and women, and the reality is that the principles and aspirations spoken of on that day could equally be supported in today's debate. The wording of the motion mentions individual Ministers, Departments, local government agencies, arm's-length bodies etc coming together to carry out evaluation work in the new local council areas. However, I think that a reference to the Education Minister or the Education Department should have been added to that. Recently, during topical questions, I asked the Minister of Education about the latest position on shared access to the schools estate, particularly sporting facilities, and was assured by the Minister that the strategy between him and the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister, although in its early stages, was being acted upon. That type of work is crucial if we are to overcome the decades of underinvestment and underachievement under direct rule when resources were swallowed up due to the security situation in those days.

Although I commend the work of Disability Sports NI and many of the other sporting bodies and partners to date, I accept that there is much more to be done. The facilities and opportunities available to those with disabilities to participate in sport have been lagging behind for some time. The lack of facilities affects everyone, at all levels, right from those who play the very popular game of boccia even on a social basis to those who train five, six or seven days a week to participate and compete on the international stage and bring success to our small country at elite levels. Kevin O'Neill, the chief executive of Disability Sports Northern Ireland, stated that we are now seeing the results of all mainstream sports organisations having been working hard in partnership over the past 15 years. So, I now believe that it is the time and opportunity, led by the Assembly, to ensure that the support systems and physical structures are in place in our new council areas to make sure that we can develop and encourage future talent.

Today is probably a good time to again take the opportunity to try to support the future development of community sports hubs. The Committee visited those facilities last year in Scotland, and I know that the Minister is supportive of the idea moving forward. They could provide the answer in a small country such as Northern Ireland through a shared facility being developed between different sports clubs and community groups and should suit everyone, if they are minded to, from major clubs through to those involved in minority sports. They would, of course, be disability-compliant to suit everyone's needs and abilities. Finance can be better spent that way, and investment can go further by developing the community sports hubs and targeting areas of social need in each new council area. Those hubs could mark the beginning of a new era in sports provision, impacting on health, education and the social economy.

At this stage, I declare an interest in that I am involved in the early development of such a hub in my constituency. I am totally amazed at the support and enthusiasm shown by people who are heavily involved in the community and voluntary sector. That support ranges from football clubs and ladies' hockey clubs to healthcare providers, social services, the local older people's forum, the local regional college, the local council, the young people's disability group, and many more. Amazingly, there could be anything up to a dozen partners if the scheme is given the go-ahead, thus catering for a wide range of community needs and provision.

We need to encourage the new councils to get on board with that type of development, and I would like to turn briefly to what I believe to be an associated issue. If we are to evaluate the existence and suitability of sporting facilities in the new council areas, we should be mindful of the support structures for people with special needs and disabilities. By that, I mean the likes of coaching, equipment etc. Outside the local structures, it is worth remembering that the majority of sports clubs are run and coached by volunteers who give of their free time not only to coach but to gain qualifications. Without their valuable contribution, many sports clubs would simply not exist. It is easy to pay tribute to those people from the Floor of the Assembly but I firmly believe that, if we are to evaluate the position in each of the new council areas, they need to be taken into consideration and given all the support that we can muster. Those volunteers understand the different types of disability, the appropriate help to put in place and the correct support systems. They also do a fantastic job in changing the mindset of others. I believe that there is still in some quarters a negative perception regarding disability and sport, thus stigmatising individuals with differences.

When we consider that 85% of people with disabilities never take part in any form of sport or physical recreation —

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

**Mr Hilditch:** — there is no doubt that much more can be achieved. I support the motion and look forward to the Minister's response.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. I support the motion.

Tá ráiteas misin ag Disability NI ag rá go bhfuil sé ag obair le comhionannas deise a bhaint amach do dhaoine míchumasacha páirt a ghlacadh i spórt agus i gcaitheamh aimsire fisiciúil ag a leibhéal féin.

Disability Sports NI's mission statement is this:

*"Working to achieve equality of opportunity for people with disabilities to take part in sport and physical recreation at a level of their choice."*

As well as that, the equality legislation that came about as a result of the Good Friday Agreement is meant to afford protection to

those with disabilities and to prevent discrimination against them, direct or indirect.

Ach is cuma cé chomh láidir ná chomh lag atá sé, ní leor é reachtaíocht.

However, legislation, however weak or strong, is not enough to guarantee that the designated groups have the same experience of life in all its aspects as the able-bodied. Therefore, we need to do more to make the necessary changes that will allow all members of society, including the disabled, to use and be part of sporting facilities in whatever way they choose. That means that we must send a message to all the agencies involved that they should work in partnership to ensure real inclusivity in the sporting environment for those with disabilities. That includes organisations with special responsibilities like Disability Sports NI, Sport NI itself, and the Ministers whose remits relate to this, namely the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Environment Minister, who has local councils under his remit. I also include the Health Minister and the Education Minister, who have related responsibilities.

Statistically, it is clear that those with disabilities are noticeably less likely to participate in physical activity than those without. In fact, our society has a real problem in general with taking regular physical exercise, and we know that this is a major factor in the worrying increase in levels of obesity and associated illnesses. When we read that only 19% of people with disabilities take part in regular physical activity compared with 37% of the general population, we know that there is an issue and we must take action. Caithimid gníomh a dhéanamh.

There are clearly health implications, because those with disabilities are already ill to one degree or another, and if we fail to create the enabling environment that allows them to access the services and facilities that everyone is entitled to, we are possibly guilty of contributing to the likely deterioration of their health.

Of course, at the opposite end of the spectrum, there are the success stories of those with disabilities who have achieved greatness at the top of their sport and we commend all of them. No one will mind if we make special mention of Kelly Gallagher, whose recent achievement of winning a gold medal in Russia filled everyone with pride and admiration. There have been many other examples of local disabled sportspeople from the North who competed and achieved huge success over recent years.

It is important that we have the facilities and provision in place to encourage such elite sportsmen and women to fulfil their potential in whatever way they can. It is equally important that everyone with a disability feels included in the sphere of sport and physical activity, whether that is as a participant, a sportsperson, a supporter, a spectator or just a part of the community that wants to feel part of a friendly social environment. If we are to be genuinely inclusive, we have to ensure that people with disabilities are actively encouraged to be part of sporting and physical life in whatever way they choose, so we need to examine whether the existing recommendations of a previous Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee are being adhered to. The Committee recommended the expansion of specific programmes aimed at increasing participation among groups, including people with disabilities. It also recommended that local authorities enhance training for staff at leisure centres on how to best provide services for such groups.

It is disappointing, though, to note the poor uptake of local councils in the inclusive sports facility accreditation scheme devised by Disability Sports NI. To date, only one council has been accredited and five others are currently under assessment. That means that 20 councils have failed to take advantage of the opportunity to show what they are doing. I would just like to mention the example of one of my local constituents, who raised an issue with me. He is deaf, and he cannot go into the leisure centre on his own to use the facilities. He has to be accompanied by someone in case there is a fire and he does not hear the alarm going off. That is something that needs to be looked at. Someone who already has a disability should not be further discriminated against.

Ultimately, we would like to see all sports and physical activity providers adopting an attitude of encouraging the participation of people with special needs and disabilities —

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time has gone.

**Ms McCorley:** — to ensure that they do not feel excluded from any leisure centre or sporting arena. The question is, are we doing all we can —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member's time is up.

**Mr Eastwood:** I thank the proposers of the motion. It is a very important motion. We all feel that we are doing our best to ensure that people feel included and feel equal in our

society, but it is not always the case. It is obviously unintentional, but we exclude people every day of the week. I had the very good fortune to be involved in a group called Foyle Sailability, which just began its work last year. We have a tremendous resource, as you know, Mr Speaker, in our city. It is called the River Foyle. Very few of us have ever used it to its full potential, but it is now being used much more. We had the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race in our city last year, and it will be back in June. We spent thousands upon thousands of pounds on a big pontoon for the clipper race, but I do not think that we really thought about the implications that that would have for people with a disability. The good work that people such as Cathal McElhatton at Foyle Sailability have done has opened our eyes to the possibilities and some of the pitfalls around public investment and council investment in these kinds of schemes.

I was lucky enough to be there last year when hundreds of young and old people with special needs and disabilities were able to access the Foyle for the first time. It was tremendous to see people being able to get out on the different sail boats. The difficulty is that it all costs money. People in a wheelchair can only get off the pontoon with a certain type of boat, which we do not have in Derry, but we were lucky enough that the people at Belfast Lough Sailability were very kind to loan the boat for that year. So, there are challenges around funding and everything else. However, it allowed me to see the possibilities and to see the faces of people when they were finally able to do something that they did not think they would ever be able to do. That is worth whatever money it costs to try to invest properly in access for the disabled. It just shows that we think that we are doing everything that we can by putting a ramp here or a ramp there, but we really do not understand the needs of people with disabilities until we go through it, and I think that it is important that we do. The motion is very important in pointing that out.

**11.15 am**

We have a tremendous opportunity now, with the review of public administration. The new councils will begin their work very soon. With community planning being a core element to the new council set-ups, it is an opportunity to ensure that everybody, regardless of their background or ability, can access the tremendous facilities that our councils offer. We need to be mindful of all the volunteers, parents and everybody else who put so much work into ensuring that our communities and everybody in them can have access to those

facilities. We, as a Government, and councils need to be there to play our part in ensuring that people can access those facilities. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 went a long way in ensuring that people would have proper access, but it was basic access. We now have to go beyond that and ensure that everybody can access all facilities, not just basic ones, and that everyone can play their full part in the sporting life of our communities.

The great news that came from Russia on Kelly Gallagher's success at the Paralympics has been mentioned; in fact, it is probably the only bit of good news that we have had in a while from Russia. That young lady is a fantastic advocate, supporter and inspiration to all those people who want to achieve their dreams, regardless of whether they are disabled. What she has done, against all the odds, is something that we should all be very proud of.

We now need to do our part. The figures for accredited facilities at councils do not make very good reading. One council has been accredited and six are under assessment, but 19 have not even gone through any process. This is the opportunity to get all our councils on board. We need to ensure that we hammer home the message that it is not good enough merely to put a ramp here or a ramp there. Everybody has to have access to all our tremendous facilities and community assets.

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank everyone who has spoken and attended today's debate. In particular, I thank the Research and Information Service for its provision of a very good report, and the movers of the motion and the contributors to the debate.

I listened very carefully to the debate and the views expressed on the motion. It is no surprise that many points have been raised in some detail by most contributors. I wholeheartedly support the motion, and I believe that it is a very worthy debate, particularly when we talk about inclusion and equality issues.

Like many Ministers, I am prepared to work with our stakeholders, which include our Minister of the Environment, our local authorities, Disability Sports NI, Sport NI, the Minister of Education, the Minister of Health and, indeed, the First Minister and deputy First Minister. In short, section 75 and the full implementation of that legislation is everyone's business, and I will not shirk my responsibility to ensure that people who need protection most are well protected.

We need to provide opportunities to support and encourage a vibrant and thriving environment in which people with special needs and disabilities can fully participate in their chosen sport, or, for that matter, physical activity. Today, through contributions and interventions, it was said that we want to offer full opportunities to develop talents and to allow people to aspire to the heights of local athletes. We also want to look at people who just want to become involved in physical activity and sport.

Everyone mentioned Kelly Gallagher's success and her ability to overcome many challenges. It is a collective pride that is shared throughout the House, not just for Kelly but for our Paralympians who competed in London 2012 and who have continued and will continue to inspire those with disabilities and special needs who are coming behind them. We need to offer full access to the best opportunities for sport and physical activity for those with disabilities and special needs who wish to have, and deserve, that access.

Everyone posed this question: how do we do that? Many contributors talked about statistics, the Sport Matters strategy and, in many instances, the shocking statistics for implementation and even participation. I want to touch on some of the points raised by the majority of, if not all, Members. Access and transport are huge issues. We have taken, and will continue to take, note of the issues to pursue them and to try to ensure that investment is made.

The Chair, the proposer of the motion, David Hilditch and Michael McGimpsey mentioned promoting equality, tackling poverty and promoting social inclusion, particularly around community hubs and sports provision. — *[Interruption.]* God bless you. It is very important, and recognition of that through the policy has driven and was instrumental in obtaining the additional funding.

It is really important, particularly when we are promoting equality, that it is equality for all, including people with special needs and disabilities. I will try to ensure that funding, particularly, but not exclusively, for the three main sports governing bodies will endure beyond 2015. I have started to work with Executive colleagues to ensure that that happens.

From as far back as 2009, Sport NI has carried out extensive research to establish the existing facilities throughout the North. That is a good body of work, but we need to build upon it. We

also need to build upon not just the DCAL branches but the arm's-length bodies and what other Departments have done towards meeting their statutory obligation to have full equality of access. The database characterises facilities by 15 sports, including pitches, sports halls, bowling greens, athletics tracks and adventure sports. It has provided a lot of detail about the facilities, but I could do a lot more, and Disability Sports NI has advocated that there is much more that we could do. As Colum Eastwood, the last Member to speak said, while we have a huge opportunity, which others mentioned, through RPA, we are still falling short. None of us wants that to happen on our watch.

My Department, Sport NI, Disability Action, the Department of Education and other Departments are looking at what we can do now. We have huge opportunities with RPA, and the stadia development presents us all, particularly me and local government, with new opportunities.

To that end, Sport NI and Disability Sports NI have prepared and jointly released 'Access to Sports Facilities for People with Disabilities: Design & Management Guidelines'. These guidelines are very important and are aimed in particular at facility owners, design professionals and other individuals involved in the provision and management of sporting facilities. The guidelines are based on available and emerging best practice to help to:

*"ensure that all new, extended and altered sports facilities ... are built and managed to optimum levels of good practice in terms of access for people with disabilities."*

Accessibility is also particularly important, as I said earlier, to the stadia development programme, and new and enhanced guidance on access to stadia for people with disabilities, which was published in December 2013, was specifically developed and designed for the stadia programme.

The guidance was developed by Disability Sports NI in conjunction with DCAL and the new stadia advisory group, which includes representatives of disability agencies and groups.

It is really important that, between us, we use these opportunities in a very respectful, open and honest way to look at where the gaps are and how we can bridge, if not close, them. We have only to look at the recent successes of athletes to remind us all that, with a small targeted investment, we can not only contribute

to their lives and performance but help them to achieve elite status.

Also important is that, through visits, I know that the number of people with disabilities who want to access our lakes, rivers and waterways is huge. It is growing, and we need to make sure that it does not become the rule that people in Derry have to rely on the generosity of people in Belfast to get access. That should not be the case, and I know that people in the council, along with those in Sport NI and my Department, are not happy to allow that to continue. I am aware of that, and we are working with the new councils — at this stage rather than waiting for the new configurations to be in place — to make sure that we all look to see what opportunities there are to take.

The community hubs were mentioned. I am working very closely on those with my colleagues in DOE and DE. The hubs will be a huge success, and we are looking at the health benefits as well.

These partnerships, while informal, will have some respect and value added to them when we start to make investment. Investment is much smarter when we look at where we can do it collectively. Not only do you get a better return for public spend, but you get more for that public spend. It helps to cement and sustain the partnerships that are there as well as attracting new people and creating new opportunities. It is really important that we do that.

I also want to talk about the opportunities that we have for the arts, libraries, museums and the rest. It is not just about the new buildings that DCAL started in the previous mandate and completed in this mandate — some have yet to be completed — having DDA approval. We are looking for DDA approval as a minimum standard. We are looking for standards above that.

As Oliver and others mentioned, it is not just about the physical activity. It is really important that we look at transport and how people get to these facilities. That also needs to be targeted and was part of the promoting equality and social inclusion and tackling poverty initiative, which people may not have fully understood at the start but, I think, have fully grasped now. I welcome that.

I also welcome the opportunity to work collectively where possible. I do not believe that any of my Executive colleagues would be happy knowing that there was something appropriate and reasonable that they could

do in their Department but that was not brought to their attention and that they did not know about. I believe that there is a good generosity of spirit but, more than that, an acute awareness of our obligations around section 75. This is an example of where we need that.

I am happy to support the motion. I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate. If I have left anything out in my summing up, officials and I will have a look at the report of the debate and be happy to respond to the Members who raised those points. I welcome this very worthy debate. I look forward to its conclusion and seeing where we will go for the future.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé breá sásta bheith ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I am very pleased to speak in favour of the motion. I praise my colleague Oliver McMullan for his perseverance and stout defence of all disabled issues for many a long year. His commitment to the defence and promotion of the disabled community in the House and in the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee has been second to none.

I must declare an interest as, for quite a number of years, I worked as a project leader with a charity providing daycare and facilities, including sports facilities, for a large group of adults with physical and learning disabilities. It was in that role that I came to realise the considerable dearth of provision, particularly sporting provision, from local authorities and sports governing bodies. Years of involvement in able-bodied sports, sports councils etc also highlighted the shortage of meaningful and effective engagement across all types of disabilities and showed that what was there was, at best, haphazard and disjointed.

The seemingly successful summer 2012 Paralympics heralded what was considered at the time to be a new dawn for disabled sports, but the reality on the ground has been less tangible. The CAL Committee met with elite disabled athletes like Jason Smyth on our visit to the Sports Institute in Jordanstown, and we saw the role played by the institute in the gold medal success of Kelly Gallagher recently.

However, elite athletes, disabled or otherwise, are the exception rather than the rule. Many more stories exist of what is lacking, even as regards an understanding of what is required for full participation in disabled sports. Disability awareness in sport, while much improved from what has gone previously, still leaves much to be desired. It must be a priority

for governing bodies and local authorities from the first design and consultation to final delivery on the ground. The low rate of uptake in disabled sports stems from the non-engagement of many disabled people across all disciplines and must be addressed.

The delivery of RPA does, and must, provide an opportunity to rectify much of what is wrong in provision. A number of sports projects have come forward for delivery by the new council clusters. The new start gives us all a chance to redress the shortcomings of the past. A healthy society is one in which all members, disabled or otherwise, are given the opportunity to participate to the best of their abilities in their chosen sport or activity. The low participation figures can, and must, be improved on. The health spin-off might then be quantifiable.

### 11.30 am

In moving the motion, Oliver McMullan outlined that, here in the North, some 360,000 people are considered disabled. That puts into context the extent of the job in hand. He also outlined the barriers to disabled participation in sport, including the fact that 65% of sports coaches do not work with people with disabilities in their coaching capacities. He also outlined the scheme of registration of disabled sports through Disability Sports NI and the lack of uptake from current local authorities. That must be looked at seriously under RPA.

The Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, Michelle McIlveen, said that disabled people are half as likely to get involved in sport as their able-bodied counterparts. She said that the Committee is aware of the work that is still required. She recognised that local council facilities are central for sporting provision but said that the GAA, Irish Rugby Football Union, IFA and other governing bodies all need to deliver, particularly on the three new stadia. She also outlined the Arts Council's role in bringing forward a mapping exercise to identify participation.

Karen McKevitt praised community, voluntary and statutory bodies for the provision that they have made to date and the role that they have played in many disabled people's active lives. She said that, although access has improved, many sports venues were still unable to accommodate people with a disability. Michael McGimpsey said that the principle was equality and that the barriers to participation must be closely examined. He also said that the need for participation was very great due to the significant numbers that are involved.

Anna Lo touched on the legacy of the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics and the fact that people are now more at ease with disabled participation. She asked whether we are doing enough to deliver a strategy to ensure that disabled people take part in sport. She also touched on the differential between disabled sport participation and special needs sporting requirements.

David Hilditch thought that the education sector should also be brought into any sports strategy as a partner and provider of facilities and coaching. He said that he believed that now was the time and opportunity to look at community facilities that could be the beginning of a new era, delivering with the input of a wide range of bodies in the community sector. He also said that 85% of people with a disability never take part in sports and that that was worrying.

Rosaleen McCorley also touched on the equality issue and the relevant legislation that was brought about through the Good Friday Agreement. She also outlined the responsibility of the four Ministries that have some input to these matters. Those include the Health and Education Departments, as well as DCAL and the Department of the Environment. Colum Eastwood thought that much of the exclusion in sports was perhaps unintentional but not deliberate. He recognised the good work of a number of people and organisations.

I appreciate the Minister saying that she wholeheartedly supports the motion and that she declared her willingness to work with all the stakeholders. She said that we need to support a vibrant and thriving environment for all and to support full participation in all activities. She said that those with disabilities and special needs deserve the best facilities and the opportunity to participate and to promote social inclusion.

A Cheann Comhairle, I am delighted that the House has united on this very important issue, and I thank everyone for their support. I call for an urgent review of the facilities that have been provided to date and those that we need to move forward.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the lack of sporting facilities for people with special needs and disabilities; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Minister of the Environment and local authorities to work with*

*Disability Sports NI and Sport NI to carry out comprehensive research to evaluate the existence and suitability of sporting facilities in all the new local council areas.*

## **Religious Belief and Worship: Worldwide Freedom**

**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 Wells:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the persecution of Christians in many countries around the world and, in particular, the threat of execution of 33 Christians in North Korea for their beliefs; and calls on HM Government to exhaust all diplomatic options and influence to secure greater freedom of religious belief and worship throughout the world.*

I am sure that we have all seen the images on our television screens of what is going on in North Korea. I accept that, for some, Kim Jong-un, the present leader and grandson of the founder of North Korea, is seen as an object of derision and, indeed, of humour. Of course, we have all heard the stories about Kim Jong-un. For instance, on his first round of golf ever, he scored four holes in one, which begs the question of why is he not playing Tiger Woods at the Masters. Of course, that was reported as fact in the North Korean media.

We have also heard recently that there was a 100% turnout in the North Korean elections and that the president achieved 100% of the vote. Not even Sammy Wilson on a good day in East Antrim could achieve that, and there is slight scepticism about those figures. However, such is the control of the media in North Korea that it is very difficult to get independent corroboration of those allegations.

Members have to understand that North Korea has featured at the top of the table in every assessment of human rights abuses for the past 15 years, often by a long distance. The basic core problem with North Korea is that there is a personality cult that requires utter obedience to the memory of the founding father of North Korea, which transferred to his son and now to his grandson. It is almost idolatry in the extreme. Every household in North Korea is required to have a portrait of the great leader



and his sons, and anyone who dares to express an independent point of view is in serious trouble.

There have been ridiculous but also scary reports in the western media of people who were imprisoned because they did not applaud the great leader enthusiastically enough during one of his visits or who did not weep with sufficient sincerity when one of the dynasty passed away. Much more reliably, we know that the present leader, Kim Jong-un, ordered the execution of his uncle and his entire family as he was seen to be a subversive.

Article 68 of the North Korean constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but that freedom is on paper only. As far as can be ascertained by organisations such as Open Doors and Release International, there are only three or four churches in the capital, Pyongyang. Those seem to have been created for western viewing only and are seen to be there to try to indicate a non-existent religious freedom. There is no evidence whatsoever of any church or religious institutions anywhere else in a country with a population of 23 million people, and those churches exist entirely to paper over the cracks.

Even more worryingly, North Korea is unique in having the equivalent of gulags or prison camps very similar to those operated by the Nazis in wartime Germany. They hold anything between 20,000 and 50,000 people, many of whom are there because of their religious persuasion. It is not just Christians but Buddhists, Seventh Day Adventists and those of any other religion that is not the worship of the leadership of North Korea. Those who have escaped the prison camps report horrendous conditions, including routine beatings, torture, starvation and general ill treatment. Those who are fortunate enough to get across the border to Laos or China tell unrepeatable stories of the treatment of prisoners, including children.

The result is that it is believed that only 0.16% of the entire population of North Korea follow any form of religious activity whatsoever. The Christian Church is almost entirely underground in the form of house churches, people who are caught with Bibles are routinely imprisoned and beaten, and those who dare to carry gospel tracts or do anything that is seen to subvert state power are immediately imprisoned.

I accept that the Assembly has relatively limited powers in the field. Foreign affairs are entirely a reserved matter at Westminster, and the Assembly has no direct input into those issues. However, I think that we can use our influence

as an integral part of the United Kingdom to bring pressure on the Department of foreign affairs to do all that it can, through the UN and international diplomacy, to try to bring some relief to the torture and ill treatment of all those of a religious persuasion in that renegade state, particularly Christians. It is important to step aside from the day-to-day affairs of Northern Ireland to make our views known.

The most recent issue that has come to the fore has been the arrest of 33 Christians in North Korea and an announcement made in January by the state news agency that they face execution. What did those 33 individuals do? They are alleged to have accepted money from a South Korean Baptist organisation to further their house churches in North Korea. It was nothing more sinister than that — something about which, if it happened in Northern Ireland, no one would bat an eyelid. Now it has been announced that they face execution. Many feel that that is an attempt by Kim Jong-un to assert his authority and indicate that he is going to tolerate no dissension whatsoever.

I call on you, Mr Speaker, to consider referring the Hansard report of this debate to the Department of foreign affairs in London — assuming, as I hope, that the motion is unopposed — to show the strength of feeling amongst Christians and, indeed, non-Christians in Northern Ireland about the treatment of those individuals.

Whilst North Korea features consistently at the top of the table of the Open Doors league of infamy for human rights abuses, particularly of Christians, unfortunately, it is not on its own. Indeed, 50 countries are listed. We have to distinguish between various reasons why that is happening in other parts of the world, particularly the Arab countries.

First of all, there is tribal conflict. There is conflict between Christians and Muslims at interfaces that is more ethnic than religious persecution per se. I was in Kaduna in northern Nigeria in November. That is the interface between the Muslim-dominated north and the Christian-dominated south. Where the two communities meet, there can be increased tension and, indeed, a lot of death and looting. Indeed, in Kaduna, there was a riot where several hundred Christians were killed.

There is that aspect, but then you get states that have completely broken down, like Somalia, where, in fact, ethnic tensions are totally uncontrolled and various groups score points off each other by terrorism and the murder of individual groups, be they Christian

or otherwise. Then you have countries where militant Islamist terrorists, often controlled by organisations like Al-Qaeda, are using the murder and torture of Christians as a political weapon.

Then you have states where there is state persecution — where the state, being in most cases entirely Islamic, decides to wipe out all expressions of Christianity. Recent examples of that have been in places like Eritrea, where there are many Christians, as we speak, who are imprisoned in containers in the desert in almost intolerable conditions; or states such as Saudi Arabia, where the open practice of Christianity is totally disallowed and has been the cause of many arrests and of torture and ill-treatment. There are other countries, again, like Somalia, where, in parts of it, it seems that what little state control there is is aimed against Christians.

The result is that there is a total lack of freedom of expression in many Muslim countries. I find that highly regrettable, because what has been shown is that there are countries where the Muslim religion can be practised and where Christianity is tolerated, accepted and generally prospers. There are places like Tunisia, for instance, where there is no overt persecution of Christians, but then you go across the border to places like Algeria and, more recently, Egypt, where the situation has got extremely difficult for minority religions.

The other issue that causes us concern is the Arab spring, which was supposed to have brought freedom, tolerance and diversity in Muslim countries but has not worked. Indeed, in places like Syria and Egypt, the standing of the Christian community has dropped dramatically and many are leaving due to persecution. We must be very grateful for the toleration, openness and freedoms that we have, but it is incumbent on us as a society to make our views known. Whilst we cherish and welcome that, we must always remember the needs of others who are much less fortunate.

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion. No one should be discriminated against on grounds of religion or conscience, and everyone should condemn behaviour, within our own communities or internationally, that discriminates against others. It is sad that this debate is so topical in the 21st century due to a considerable increase in the encroachments upon religious freedom all over the world. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that:

*"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."*

#### 11.45 am

Religious freedom is a basic human right, and no one should be prosecuted for practising his or her religion. It is concerning that, in the 21st century, people are still being persecuted for their religious beliefs. I am also concerned that many countries have passed laws banning homosexuality. Last year, Russia passed laws allowing jail sentences for offending religious feelings. In many countries, we see people imprisoned, tortured and even put to death because of their sexual or political preference. This is wrong and unlawful.

The international community has a responsibility to highlight abuses and needs to demand that the highest standards of human rights are enforced. Sinn Féin supports the international community in exposing human rights violations across the globe and believes that all citizens have the right to equality and protection in practising their religious views and for their sexual orientation.

I welcome the recent United Nations report, which exposes shocking human rights violations in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and I urge the DPRK authorities to respond to its contents. The report testifies that there is an almost complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in North Korea. The entrenched patterns of discrimination rooted in the state-assigned class system affect every part of life. Discrimination against women is pervasive in all aspects of society. The state has used food as a means to control the population and has deliberately blocked aid for ideological reasons, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

Hundreds of thousands of political prisoners have died in unspeakable atrocities in prison camps in the past 50 years. Security forces systematically employ violence and punishments that amount to gross human rights violations in order to create a climate of fear. In many instances, the violations of human rights found by the UN constitute crimes against humanity, according to the 'Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea'.

According to the Rev Stuart Windsor, no political deviation is tolerated. Although the language of the Government of North Korea is that of conciliation and unity, guaranteeing religious freedom, there is a parallel message and process by that Government. The state makes concerted efforts to identify Christians. Many reports show that you cannot practise freedom of religion or belief in the DPRK. Freedom of religion or belief, which should be fully respected and guaranteed, is not. Human Rights Watch's world report highlighted that people arrested in North Korea are routinely tortured by officials seeking confessions. Such torture takes the form of sleep deprivation, beatings and so on.

It has been stated that North Korea is in a league of its own when it comes to the persecution of Christians. The rule of Kim Jong-un and his Workers' Party has been described as absolute and strict. Reports from those who have defected consistently state that one would most definitely be persecuted for practising religion. Those reports testify that religion is viewed by North Korea as a means of foreign encroachment. It is believed that it would inflict harm on North Korea's social discipline. As a result of that train of thought, North Korea has a social stratification system called Songbun in which all Christians are classified as hostile and considered even as a separate subclass. Christians whose faith is discovered are sent to political labour camps with no release date.

The findings of the UN show that North Korea has a serious case to answer regarding religious discrimination.

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

**Ms McGahan:** Life for Christians in North Korea remains bleak and there is a culture of fear. Although North Korea apparently has ratified a number of international treaties, it is clear from the evidence —

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

**Ms McGahan:** — of various reports that there are still parallel processes operating.

**Mr P Ramsey:** On behalf of the SDLP, I support the motion. I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I acknowledge the contribution of the mover of the motion. Jim Wells brought passion and knowledge to the subject matter. This is an opportunity for all in

the Chamber to reflect on the many challenges facing Christians in various corners of the world.

Freedom of religion and religious expression are guaranteed in articles 18 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as in articles 13 and 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both treaties call for state parties not only to recognise those rights but to protect the associated rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

The recent 'Report of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea' demonstrates very clearly that, despite its being a state party to those treaties, the denial of freedom of religion and religious expression is, unfortunately, alive and well in that part of the world. Vital protections under the Convention on the Rights of the Child are not afforded to citizens of North Korea, who are subsequently unable to practice the religion of their choosing. The international community cannot stand idly by and watch Christians in North Korea, or anywhere else for that matter, face the fear of execution or suppression. Civil and religious liberties should not simply be confined to a few, but to all who want to practice.

Unfortunately, the night of persecution grows darker in some parts of the world, even as we speak. Last year, my SDLP colleagues in Westminster supported an early day motion that expressed grave concern at the treatment of Christians in Sudan and urged the then Secretary of State for International Development to apply diplomatic pressure to bring about change in the policy of the Government of Sudan, which was leading to the removal of missionaries and the persecution of people who converted from Islam. We also see examples of Christians being persecuted in Palestine, Pakistan, India and Iraq.

We reject the persecution of anyone because of their faith. Governments have a big responsibility in upholding the right of their citizens to practice the faith and identity that they so desire. I request, Mr Speaker, that the Hansard report on today's debate be forwarded to the British and Irish Departments with responsibility for foreign affairs, so that they can use diplomatic missions throughout the world to advocate on those grounds. Clearly it is up to the Irish and British Governments to use whatever diplomatic options are available to them to influence and secure religious rights across the world, where they can.

We must focus on the positive role that foreign powers have played in the peace process here. However, we must show that same resolve in helping those who are facing civil and religious oppression. Governments must send out a clear message here, in Ireland and in Britain, that it is not right to threaten the execution of Christians in North Korea, burn Coptic churches in Egypt, massacre Christians in Sudan and Pakistan or burn people out of their homes because of their religion. That is not acceptable in this day and age.

Very recently, on the weekend of 15 March, during the Crimean annexation, three Catholic priests were kidnapped and questioned and abused by pro-Russian forces. That is not acceptable. The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has described the situation in Crimea as total persecution of their faith. It is no longer acceptable that people who have a sense of faith about them — in this case, of Christian values — should be persecuted in such a way. I also want to mention that the Bishop of Shanghai died on St Patrick's Day, while under house arrest in that country. Those are issues across the globe that we are only getting a feel of now.

Jim Wells has left the Chamber. I welcome the motion. Even though we have no direct influence, we have an opportunity to advocate, champion and ensure that others are taking up the baton for us —

**Mr Dallat:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr P Ramsey:** Yes.

**Mr Dallat:** Does the Member agree that there is a challenge to us in Northern Ireland to set, by our own example, the standards for people to emulate in other parts of the world?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute.

**Mr P Ramsey:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the contribution from John Dallat. I know the work that he and his wife do in helping to bring a sense of values to Third World countries. Many a year, John has visited there, not just to meet the physical needs of the people but to bring with him his own values that he has in life. We should acknowledge that, as I have acknowledged Jim Wells. However, he is right: we have been on a long journey in Northern Ireland, and there have been hurts. We have seen examples of absolute persecution in other countries. A number of

people have been executed because they have a fundamental belief in God, and that is absolutely wrong.

Mr Speaker, the SDLP supports the motion and is very keen to know that you, as Keeper of the House, will send the Hansard report to the British and Irish Governments.

**Mr Kennedy:** I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I thank and warmly commend those who brought it to the House. Freedom of religion and the ability to worship is a basic human right. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has already been cited, and I restate that the Ulster Unionist Party and I believe that freedom of thought, religion, race and gender or issues of sexuality are to be cherished and protected. What is happening in other places is of huge importance, and the House would do well to reflect on that and to take the opportunity to see how we live our own lives in this particular corner.

Some 80% of all discrimination is against Christians, and it happens in over 100 countries. The focus of the motion and that of Members who spoke previously was on North Korea. Clearly, there is widespread concern about the actions of the leadership of North Korea, and that continues. It is right that it is highlighted and that we take the opportunity to express our concern and opposition to that persecution, not just in North Korea but in other places. The situation for Christians in the Middle East is also concerning. I understand that the last church has now been destroyed in Afghanistan. Members will know that there has been an exodus of Christians from Iraq; estimates vary, but it is believed that between half a million and one million Christians have left the country over recent years. Indeed, following the fall of Saddam Hussein, that persecution has almost accelerated. That gives cause for concern as, indeed, does the situation in Syria and Egypt with the persecution of the Copts.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Christians represented 20% of the population of the Arab world; now, it is only 2%. I quote a comment in a report on Christians oppressed for their faith, which looked at the period between 2011 and 2013:

*"Taken as a whole, the oppression raises grave concerns about the long-term survival of Christianity in regions where until recently the Church has been both numerous in terms of faithful, and active in terms of the part it has played in public life."*

Ironically for some, Israel, despite its many criticisms, is the only state in the Middle East that has a large degree of religious freedom, including, not least, for the 2% of the population who are Christian and the 16% who are Muslim. It is interesting that we give some focus to Qatar. After all, the world governing body of soccer is to organise a future World Cup at that location. Although others are more concerned about the climate in which international teams will play, it is important to say that Christian worship in Qatar is allowed only in designated religious complexes, of which there are only two at the moment, which makes them easier to control and monitor. A Muslim who converts is considered an apostate and may face the death penalty. Foreign workers who evangelise non-Muslims are frequently deported.

### 12.00 noon

I welcome this opportunity. There is much to do and much persecution of Christians in other parts of the world to remind ourselves of.

**Mr Lyttle:** I give my full support and that of the Alliance Party to the motion and to the stand against any threat to freedom of religious belief in any part of the world. The Alliance Party I and are passionate about this and take it extremely seriously. That passion was displayed when, in April 2013, my colleague the Member of Parliament for East Belfast, Naomi Long, secured a similar debate at Westminster on the persecution of Christians. Although the focus of today's debate is on the persecution of Christians, it is important to acknowledge, as Members have, that other groups face religious persecution across the world. Christians and other groups face marginalisation and are excluded from public life in many parts of the world.

Society suffers from the loss of freedom and the undermining of the principles of fair treatment, the rule of law and access to justice. The defence of freedom of religious belief, as defined by article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is essential for Christians and all groups. That article clearly states:

*"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."*

We are hearing some extremely concerning reports that this international human right is being seriously contravened in North Korea in particular. Such rights must be vigorously protected worldwide. They have been under attack in other areas that Members mentioned today, such as Africa, because of the rise of extremism. We have seen concerning attacks in Mali and other countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Niger. It is important that, when mentioning international human rights and referring to countries such as Uganda, the House also condemns the life sentences that are being put in place for sexual orientation in that country. Religious persecution manifests itself in many ways, including violent attacks, torture, exclusion from public life by extremist groups across the world and discrimination in politics, business and the justice system.

As Jim Wells mentioned earlier, the Arab Spring of 2011 appeared to offer hope for reform in many countries, but, in many cases, appears to have failed to deliver on that promise. In many countries, the Arab Spring has had a detrimental impact on religious freedom and promoted an exodus of Christians across the Middle East. Already a reality in Iraq, the phenomenon has extended to other nations, most notably Egypt and Syria. As one of the Governments involved in Iraq and Syria, the UK Government must recognise that exodus and work with everyone in the international community to do all that they can to protect people of any religion who are suffering persecution in an already desperate situation. The Foreign Office must also engage with religious groups and national Governments to identify such trends and address their impact. It is vital that international pressure focuses on the right to access to justice for all those affected.

Our focus today is on the case in North Korea. The news that 33 Christians have been sentenced to death for working with Kim Jung-wook, a Baptist missionary from South Korea who was arrested in North Korea in 2013, is particularly concerning. I do not have time to go into it, but the so-called confession by Kim Jung-wook that was broadcast is particularly sinister and appears to have been forced under particular duress. I think that that is abhorrent, and it requires all action possible from the international community.

According to Open Doors' world watch list, for the eleventh year in a row, North Korea remains the most difficult country in the world in which to be a Christian. These rights are universal; they are not western constructs.

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

**Mr Lyttle:** As such, North Korea is in clear breach of them, and all pressure must be brought to bear to redress that.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I support the motion in the names of my colleagues. More importantly, I support the many millions of Christians around the world who, at this moment in time, find themselves under intolerable persecution for no other reason than their faith. I think that it is important that we send out a very strong message that the Assembly and Northern Ireland will not in any way support such behaviour and that we condemn it utterly.

I sought to research the 33 followers of Mr Kim Jung-wook, whom Mr Lyttle spoke of, but it was virtually impossible to find any information about them. I think that the North Korean regime deliberately attempted to remove such information, because when you remove somebody's identity, you remove their humanity. It is so easy to bandy about statistics about the 33 Christians or the other groups from around the world that are affected, and when you take away their identity, it makes it much easier to brush over that and to look at it as another statistic.

With the few moments that I have this afternoon, I want to take a few of these people and make sure that their names are not forgotten and brushed under the carpet. This is Kim Jung-wook, who has been sentenced to death for anti-state crimes, along with 33 other people. At this moment in time, they are in a prison facility, which I will speak about a little more in a few moments. I would like the Assembly to remember the name and face of Kim Jung-wook and not to allow the North Korean regime to turn him into a faceless, nameless statistic.

I also bring before you Mr John Short, a 75-year-old Australian missionary, who was held for one month in a North Korean jail for leaving one Gospel tract in a Buddhist temple. When the 75-year-old returned to Australia, he broke down on live television due to the pressure and stress that he was under.

Finally, I introduce Mr Kenneth Bae, an America citizen sentenced in April 2013 to 15 years' hard labour in a North Korean concentration camp for no other reason than he is a Christian. Mr Bae is a husband and a father of three children.

I think that we have to remember those people by name. We have to remember their faces

and not allow them to be dehumanised by this evil regime that is seeking to have their names and faces faded into oblivion.

The accounts coming out of the death camps and work camps are absolutely harrowing. We have been told by many witnesses that, at 3.30 am, people are taken from their beds and made to walk 12 to 14 miles to an agricultural facility, where they are forced to plough until dark with animals, not the modern machinery that our farmers use today. So, from 3.30 am until dark, they are forced to work after walking 12 to 14 miles.

The first thing that the women who are brought to these death camps and work camps are given is a blood test. That happens for two reasons. First, to check whether they have any sexually transmitted diseases, and, secondly, to check whether they are pregnant. If they are found to be pregnant when they are taken into the work camp, they will be forced, under the work camp's regime, to have an abortion. Many independent witnesses have verified that. There is a shortage of food and starvation, and many people are dying in the camps.

In conclusion, I will ask this question: what can we learn from this? I believe that the message that we in Northern Ireland have to take away from this is how precious life is. If we in the Assembly can learn anything from what is happening in North Korea, it is that no cause, ideology or intolerance is worth a human life.

**Ms Ruane:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I welcome the debate. Sinn Féin is opposed to the death penalty and always has been. We are against it whether it is used against Christians in North Korea, against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or against the African-American community in the United States.

I am glad that we do not have the death penalty here in Ireland. I am glad that we do not have it in England, Scotland or Wales, because, if we did, the Birmingham six and the Guildford four would probably have been executed. Many others were. I do not know how many people in the North and South were executed in our time who should not have been.

The 33 Christians in North Korea should not be executed. The 540-plus Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt should not be executed. The 3,905 people who, based on the latest statistics for 2013, were on death row in the United States should not be executed.

Bronwyn McGahan outlined our position on freedom of religious belief. I will add conscience to that. I think that it is really important that we guarantee freedom of religious belief and the freedom of those who do not have religious belief. I do not believe that people should be discriminated against on the grounds of religious belief and nor should those who have no such belief. I would like to see much more interfaith dialogue throughout the world.

We cannot escape the historical reality of the link between religion and politics. Much of colonialism, war and oppression are in the name of religion — all different types of religion. We, in this part of the world, can look at what happened, including with the crusades and Christopher Columbus "discovering" the Americas. "Discovering" the Americas? What about the natives who had their own beliefs? What guarantee of religious freedom did those natives have? Indeed, we need just look at what happened to natives in Australia and different parts of the world.

Who funded the newcomers? Christopher Columbus was funded by European Governments, which, in many cases, paved the way for marauding armies to plunder, pillage and rape.

**Mr Kennedy:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** We had it in Ireland through the penal laws. We had the scramble for —

**Mr Kennedy:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** No. I have a lot of issues to discuss here. You had your time to speak. We had the scramble to carve up Africa and the untold misery for the entire continent.

**Mr Kennedy:** On a point of order. The issues that Ms Ruane is outlining are not relevant to the motion, which concerns religious persecution, particularly in North Korea. We see from Ms Ruane another rant against imperialism or alleged imperialism.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member and all Members know that I give some latitude in debates in the House. Let us move on.

**Ms Ruane:** With respect to the Member who spoke, the title of the motion is "Freedom of Religious Belief". Is the Member saying that Christians are the only people who should have freedom of religious belief? I sincerely hope not.

**Mr Lynch:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** I will certainly give way.

**Mr Kennedy:** You would not give way — to me anyway.

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat. Does the Member agree with me that religion and political institutions should be separate in society?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute.

**Ms Ruane:** Gabhaim buíochas don intervention sin, agus aontaim leis an Chomhalta. I thank the Member for that intervention. I absolutely agree with him. I said at the start that Sinn Féin is opposed to the death penalty, supports the motion and is opposed to what is happening to the 33 Christians in North Korea. However, we are also saying that we need to look at the role of colonialism and at how religion has been used to discriminate, dominate and, ultimately, at how it played a role in world wars. We need to move away from that.

Before I was interrupted, I was speaking about the carve-up of Africa. Untold misery was brought to an entire continent by European colonisers. It was a shameful era of human slavery.

Although I welcome the debate, you might think that the DUP brought the motion to the House because it is opposed to the death penalty, but it is not. Jeffrey Donaldson is on record as supporting the restoration of the death penalty —

**12.15 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We are now straying from the motion, and I advise the Member to get back to the motion before the House.

**Ms Ruane:** As we know and I would like the House to note, 33 people will be executed unless something happens worldwide, so we are talking about the death penalty, and it is unfortunate that some parties support it.

I welcome the fact that all parties support the freedom of religious belief. Given that we want freedom for all religions and that the DUP is standing up for religious belief, I await with great anticipation its condemnation of anti-Catholicism where it occurs.

**Mrs Foster:** Will the Member give way?

**Ms Ruane:** No, I will not. Will they challenge the Orange Order when it steps out of line? Maybe they will no longer stay silent on the likes of Harryville, the Holy Cross and the more recent behaviour against Christians at St Patrick's chapel in Belfast. I welcome the fact that the loyal orders are talking to the Catholic Church — *[Interruption.]* It is a pity that the Member keeps talking; she will have her time to speak. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Ms Ruane:** I welcome the fact that the Catholic Church and the loyal orders are speaking, but when will the DUP urge the loyal orders to speak to residents? I was in Korea —

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

**Ms Ruane:** I was right up at the DMZ, and the people in South and North Korea —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I call Robin Newton.

**Ms Ruane:** — would like to see those countries working together.

**Mr Newton:** Simon Heffer, in his book 'Great British Speeches', highlights a speech made in 1792 by Charles James Fox in the House of Commons, when he spoke on religious liberty. He said:

*"to call on man to give up his religious rights, was to call on him to do that which was impossible... no state could compel it — no state ought to require it, because it was not in the power of man to comply with that requisition."*

History gives us examples of religious intolerance and the outworkings of that intolerance, and in many of those examples people are prepared to give their life rather than forsake their religious beliefs or their Christian faith. In 1555, men who became known as the Oxford martyrs were burned at the stake because they would not recant their religious beliefs. Men such as Hugh Latimer, Thomas Cranmer and Nicholas Ridley believed in religious freedom and were prepared to die for their beliefs. We also know about the evil of inquisitions and that infamous ethnic persecution known as the Holocaust, starting in 1933 under Adolf Hitler and ending only when the Allies won the war in 1945. It is estimated

that, because of religious intolerance, 11 million people were murdered during the Holocaust, six million of whom were Jews — two thirds of all the Jewish people in Europe.

In supporting the motion, I want to place emphasis on the words "freedom of religion". Freedom of religion means more than the right to worship in a church or in your home; freedom of religion is a principle that supports the freedom of an individual or a community in public or in private to manifest religion or belief in a teaching, practice, worship or observance. The concept is also generally recognised to mean that you have the right to change your religion or the right not to follow a religion. Freedom of religion does not prevent there being a state church; however, individuals should not be forced to join a state church and should join only of their own free will.

The motion calls on us to express our concerns about freedom of religious belief in many countries, but especially about the threat to execute 33 Christians in North Korea. The persecution of Christians continues. A survey by Open Doors, a Christian watch organisation, has confirmed that, in eight countries, persecution has increased seriously; in 22 countries, persecution has increased; and, in 13 countries, the level of persecution has stayed more or less the same.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Newton:** I will give way.

**Mr Wells:** In my opening speech, I referred to the Open Doors table. I wish to point out a slight error: I quoted Tunisia as an example of a Muslim country where there was tolerance, but it is number 30 on that list. The country that I should have referred to is Lebanon.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute onto his time.

**Mr Newton:** In 13 countries, the level of persecution has stayed more or less the same. In three countries, persecution has decreased; and, in two countries, it has decreased considerably. Overwhelmingly, in those cases, it is extremism that drives the persecution of Christians. It is the refusal to countenance other religions — a rejection of others and their religion, their values and their rights.

North Korea is especially difficult for Christians. Even a cursory look at this failed state shows that it regards human life as disposable and of little worth. Mr Wells referred to the gulags,



torture, state control and starvation as a weapon. All the reports coming from this state, which is run by a tyrant, despot and dictator, paint a picture of fear, revulsion and horror that confirms that human life in that state is of little value. It is a concept that they do not seem to understand. Even a quick look at North Korea will reveal what Christians in that chaotic country will suffer for their religious beliefs and freedoms. There is, undoubtedly, a desire in the country when people put themselves in a position where they know that their life is at risk yet wish to continue to observe their Christian faith. When they are prepared to do that, you know the standing of those people and their beliefs.

We should support the motion on behalf of all those who suffer for their faith at a level of pain and agony that we can only guess at.

**Mr Rogers:** I welcome the motion and the opportunity to reflect on the Christians facing persecution in North Korea and in other countries.

Some of the greatest vices in the world today are religious intolerance and sectarianism, which breed not only hatred and violence and the mutilation of people but the desecration of homes, families and human life. We need to see greater acceptance of cultural and religious diversity. Religious persecution of any kind must be condemned. It is noteworthy that most of the persecution is happening in the countries of the Middle East, where Christianity was born but where the number of Christians is dwindling. Eighty three per cent of countries guarantee freedom of religion, but many are not making provision for it. We must show solidarity with Christians and emphasise that the presence of Christians in that part of the world is a great mediating factor, often, for example, between different segments of Islam.

We must appreciate that civil rights and religious freedoms are inextricably linked and must be fiercely guarded. The British and Irish Governments must work with other Governments across the EU and, indeed, across the world in order to ensure that a coordinated approach is taken to eradicating all forms of religious intolerance.

Religious persecution in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea commenced before the Korean War. One estimate suggests that between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians still profess their religion secretly in Korea despite the high risks. Nobody should have to suppress and disguise their religious beliefs through fear of what the state may do.

Generally, Korea's policy towards religion has been described as a dual one through which an appearance of religious tolerance is maintained for the international audience while, in fact, religious activities are suppressed internally. This cannot be tolerated by the international community.

The Human Rights Act 1998 protects our rights to have our own thoughts and beliefs. We also have the right to put our thoughts and beliefs into action. Although the motion is primarily about North Korea, I think of the many Irish missionaries from different traditions who have lost their life in Africa and in other countries. Even today, two great friends — Father Nicky and Father Diarmuid — continue to live and preach the gospel in Africa.

This week in Enniskillen, we have the twenty-fifth Novena of Hope, which was started by our own missionary, Father Brian D'Arcy. Last night, John McAreavey gave his Christian witness. We are far away from Korea, and the world is aghast, rightly, at what has happened in Crimea. It is the responsibility of the British and Irish Governments to engage with other Governments and pursue diplomatic channels to tackle religious intolerance and, just like in Enniskillen, give Christians hope, irrespective of where they live.

**Mr G Robinson:** I congratulate my colleagues for bringing the debate to the House today. It is welcome that we can express solidarity with fellow Christian human beings throughout the world in their time of extreme persecution. I take the opportunity to commend my colleague David McIlveen for his very moving contribution to the debate.

Every Sunday, we all have the ability and luxury of freely going to our place of worship without fear of retribution. Recently, throughout the world, we have seen attacks on Christian churches that have claimed innocent lives. That has to be unreservedly condemned. If such atrocities were perpetrated on UK soil, there would be mayhem. More than 2,000 Christians gathered in Colombo in Sri Lanka last Sunday to protest attacks on Christian places of worship in January this year. That is the result of denying freedom of religious belief.

In a recent report, Open Doors identified the 50 most dangerous countries for Christians. North Korea is ranked first and has been every year for the past 12 years. Therefore, the threat to the 33 Christians in North Korea is very dire and real. The same Open Doors report stated that it had no figures for killings in North Korea but said that Christians there faced the highest

imaginable pressure and some 50,000 to 70,000 lived in political prison camps. It is obvious that the dictator is the false god for North Korea, but that should not prevent our Government at Westminster using all the diplomatic contacts they have to have those Christians released and to bring an end to their persecution. Perhaps the leadership of North Korea is afraid that allowing freedom of religious belief will expose their dictatorial ways and lead, in the long term, to expression of personal belief and the downfall of dictatorship.

I urge all Members to support this worthwhile motion, which talks about Christians and does not, in any way, differentiate between the opinions in the Christian Churches, so that we can see the 33 people who are under threat released and support respect for Christianity around the world. I support the motion.

**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 the House returns will be Question Time.

*The debate stood suspended.*

*The sitting was suspended at 12.28 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair) —*

2.00 pm

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Culture, Arts and Leisure

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** We start with listed questions. Question 1 has been withdrawn.

#### Sport: Female Participation

2. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department and Sport NI are actively promoting opportunities for greater participation in sport and physical activity for girls and women. (AQO 5845/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure):** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Member for her question.

Females are significantly under-represented in sport in comparison with males. To help to address the problem, Sport Matters, DCAL's sport strategy, contains a specific target to deliver a 6% increase in women's participation rates by 2019. To ensure that the target is achieved, a published Sport Matters action plan contains actions embracing a range of organisations across the sport and leisure sector. They include promoting increased female participation through a series of departmental investments and encouraging other parties, such as councils and governing bodies, to do likewise. In particular, Sport NI's investment programmes, such as Active Communities, Awards for Sport and Active Clubs, to name but a few, include targets to increase girls' and women's participation in sport. The most recent progress report shows that the 2012-13 continuous household survey records that female participation in sport has increased to 41%. That is an increase of 16%, which puts the strategy on track to meet the target, but I still hold the view that we have much work to do.

**Ms Fearon:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister mentioned some organisations and bodies. Will she outline how they help with the delivery of the Sport Matters target to increase female participation in sport?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for her supplementary. The bodies include district councils, which are involved in the delivery of the Active Communities programme. The Ulster Council of the GAA is also delivering programmes such as Gaelic 4 Mothers, recreational games for adults, Have a Go games and coaching development workshops. The IFA has also done excellent work, particularly on the expansion of junior girls' leagues and the growth of women's senior leagues. It has held open days to introduce girls to soccer and delivered a SCORE pilot project that provides clubs with tools to enable them to encourage more girls into the sport. Ulster Rugby, through its women's development officer, has delivered a number of programmes, including the Play Rugby Girls initiative and the Girls Schools' Cup. Sport NI is also working with a number of governing bodies of sport to support the development of a female sports forum.

**Miss M McIlveen:** The Commission on the Future of Women's Sport in the UK reported last year that only one in five members of the boards of national governing bodies was a woman and a quarter of sports had no women in board positions. What role can the Minister play to encourage governing bodies in Northern Ireland to recruit more women — in some instances, a woman — to their boards? Does she agree that this would help to increase the number of women participating in sport?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I absolutely agree with the Member. I may not have seen that report, but I have certainly seen similar reports and heard a radio programme one night about this very thing. It is totally unacceptable that, in 2014, governing bodies have no women on their board. Despite some of the programmes that they offer, they need to put a bit more thought into how they will attract more women and girls to the sport. I will monitor this through the Sport Matters monitoring group, which includes representation from the governing bodies, and I will continue to question it. What some of the governing bodies have done is very good, but others need to follow their example. We must congratulate female athletes and the women who come behind them. We all have responsibility for doing more to raise awareness of women and girls in sport, and the governing bodies certainly need to do more work on that.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Has Sport NI any plans to increase the opportunities for young females and women in rural areas to get involved in sport?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Absolutely. We talked about promoting equality, tackling poverty and promoting social inclusion during the earlier debate. When money went to the three governing bodies, it was with a particular emphasis: to tackle not only deprivation but rural isolation. Some of the governing bodies, if not all, have branches and leagues in rural communities. They need to make sure that, if they have a certain number of young girls and women involved in sport now, they do not settle for that. They need to go out and make sure that the figure is increased. As I said to the Chair of the CAL Committee, we will raise the issue with the governing bodies and with the sports when I meet them, which I do regularly.

**Mrs Overend:** I will take my lead from an earlier thread. Role models are very important in encouraging more female participation in sport. Has the Minister been proactive in trying to get more television coverage for female sports? If she has, can she detail what she has been doing?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I have reminded some of the media that, when they cover some sports events, particularly events that involve women, albeit that there are so few, they need to do more of it. There are plenty of good news stories out there involving women and girls in sport. I have met television companies and media providers on a range of issues but primarily to do with broadcasting. I have raised this but not just this; I have raised the fact that there is so much good work out there involving communities, including in the arts, sports and culture, and perhaps we should look at a way of profiling that. I would be happy to assist in doing that.

## **Mental Health: DCAL Investment**

3. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any investment towards better mental health initiatives from within her Department. (AQO 5846/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for her question and, indeed, for her consistent support for mental health promotion. I recognise the valuable contribution that culture, arts and leisure can make to improving health and combating the depression and anxiety that, in the worst cases, as we know, have the potential to lead to self-harm and suicide. Therefore, DCAL is supporting a number of initiatives. They include the IFA health programme, which has received over £500,000; Sport NI's Minding Your Head awareness programme, which has

so far received £42,000; Libraries NI, which has done an excellent job in respect of the Health in Mind programme, which received around £1 million from the Big Lottery Fund; and the Arts Council, which has invested £200,000 in a youth arts strategy, particularly around piloting initiatives aimed at young people who are at risk of poor mental health. There was also funding for a small pilot programme of £30,000 for two projects to look at how suicide awareness can be conveyed to sports groups and community groups.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed response. You detailed a number of the suicide awareness prevention programmes: will they be rolled out across the North, including Foyle? Does the Minister intend to work directly with the Health Minister, particularly on suicide prevention and addiction issues in the Foyle area?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am working with the Health Minister and other Ministers, particularly around the promotion of better mental health. It is a strapline, but it is one that we have taken very seriously: suicide is everybody's business. We are part of the ministerial subcommittee on suicide prevention and better mental health provision, and I assure the Member that DCAL is taking forward pilot programmes that seek to increase awareness of issues around poor mental health and suicide prevention, as I mentioned in the main answer, primarily in sports clubs.

For this programme, there is currently one group in Belfast, and Níamh Louise is the charity that looks after rural communities. The post-project evaluation will take place with a view to extending it. DCAL is also working with DARD to ensure that suicide prevention and better mental health promotion happens in rural communities. DARD has been very proactive, as has the Health Department, around Libraries initiatives, particularly around providing the 10 safeTALK suicide prevention programmes, which are in Shantallow in the Foyle constituency. I assure the Member that I speak on behalf of the Ministers I mentioned and those I did not when I say that I do not think that we are done yet; we are actively looking at ways in which we can provide a cross-departmental approach to a very serious issue.

**Mr Campbell:** It is undoubtedly the case that there will be widespread support for such a move, but has any thought been given to ensuring that a champion for people with mental health issues can be brought forward to

help promote leisure pursuits and active sports participation in that category?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for his question. We are actively looking for champions. At the minute, we have one for boxing, and we are looking at some for soccer, GAA, rugby and angling. A number of sports personalities have been very proactive and genuine in their support for the issue and are happy to give of their time. At the minute, we are looking at that to see how we can best use it. Already, we have Carl Frampton and Paddy Barnes in north Belfast. Those two boxers have gone with the strapline of "We've got your back; we've got your corner". They have done some very good work, and we aim to build on that and to have it not only in Belfast but rolled out across the North, where possible.

**Mr Rogers:** Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Will you elaborate on the programmes that aim to re-engage disaffected young people who have mental health problems?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** DCAL is working with a number of sports bodies. We are also working with arts organisations and across the community, particularly in neighbourhood renewal areas. We are also working with libraries and groups across the rural communities. When we are looking at child protection and safeguarding issues, I hope to provide, through creative industries, libraries, sports or governing bodies, opportunities to build in good mental health awareness. That is because the evidence thus far is that, if and when young men in particular talk, they normally talk to peers in school or mostly to peers in sports clubs. So, we aim to help to prepare the sports providers and coaches to cope with people who are presenting, sometimes in crisis.

**Mr Beggs:** Can the Minister advise how she has adapted programmes in her Department following the Bamford review of mental health?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Bamford review of mental health, particularly suicide prevention, looked at inequalities and people with disabilities, which itself is an equality issue. We are taking a cross-departmental approach. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is leading on the ministerial subcommittee, in which most of us are actively involved. We are looking at programmes through which we can support each other's work. First of all, we are making sure that the programmes are relevant and based in government policy. If they are not, we make sure that they are based in government policy. It is a very proactive

subcommittee. Although Bamford is not my sole purpose, I am aware of it and of my responsibilities to it. I am sure that the Member heard the debate that we had about facilities for people with disabilities and special needs. All that we have to do, without putting titles on it, is implement section 75.

## Poetry: DCAL Promotion

4. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she has taken to promote poetry. (AQO 5847/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for his question. DCAL promotes poetry in a variety of ways through a range of our arm's-length bodies. In 2013, a number of specific projects featuring poetry and other forms of literature took place as part of the City of Culture. The Arts Council, through its annual programme, funds Poetry Ireland and the Verbal Arts Centre, poetry being part of its remit. The Brussels Platform is a collaboration between the Arts Council and the Office of the Executive in Brussels. It involves local artists showcasing their talents in the city and, indeed, in the European Parliament. Internationally acclaimed poet Paul Muldoon is the latest home-grown talent to represent the arts as part of that initiative. The first-ever Belfast poet laureate, Dr Sinéad Morrissey, was a recipient of an Arts Council major individual award in 2012. As the Member knows, Sinéad went on to win the T S Eliot prize for poetry. This year, Nathaniel Joseph McAuley, a Belfast-based poet, and Matt Kirkham, a County Down-based poet, are in receipt of awards under the artists' career enhancement scheme. Promoting and providing access to poetry is a key component of the libraries strategy. Indeed, the Public Record Office has also hosted poetry evenings.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr McNarry for a supplementary — possibly in rhyme.

**Mr McNarry:** I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer.

Can I say we talk in here, sometimes in anger,  
sometimes in jest,  
Each attempting no matter to give our very  
best?  
Budgets, flags, parades we trot them out one by  
one,  
And only recently, Minister, we hovered on the  
brink over those on the run.  
So, Minister, my supplementary is quite  
unconditional:  
Will you recognise that poetry is traditional?

Have you got the money to fund this  
expression?  
Or will you let it float away in another  
depression?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** And you did not rap.

**Mr McNarry:** If you are game, I am game.

2.15 pm

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I could have done the bass drums for you at the back. Fair play to you. That is probably one of the best exchanges that you and I have ever had, and we have a long history going back to 2007, but we will say no more. *[Laughter.]* The Member is right: we need to fund poetry. We have a great history and heritage of poetry in the North. We recently marked the very sad passing of Seamus Heaney. We also have Sinéad Morrissey and the others that I mentioned. We need to support them. I have no doubt that they will be exemplars for budding poets in all places, including the House, who need to come forward.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Seán Lynch to beat that.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Can the Minister provide details of other projects that the Arts Council supports to promote poetry?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I felt sorry for Seán having to ask a supplementary after such colour from David on the Back Benches.

The Arts Council has done a lot to promote poetry. 'Irish Pages' in New York was established for emerging poets and appears biannually. It has been awarded a grant of almost £30,000 for 2014-15. 'Abridged', a magazine of poetry and photography, periodically publishes entirely new work from established and emerging poets. 'The Honest Ulsterman' published new poetry for over 30 years and is being revived this year by the Verbal Arts Centre with a new editor.

Poetry Ireland also receives Arts Council support for Poetry in Motion and a poetry in schools initiative. The Arts Council has done quite a lot to promote poetry. Like some of the rest of the DCAL family, the Arts Council is anxious and eager to find out what else we can do to make sure that there is a better promotion of, and investment in, poetry.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a cuid freagraí. Is dócha go mbeidh a fhios ag an Aire go bhfoilsítear filíocht i nGaedhilg san iris 'An tUltach'. Ar an drochuair, áfach, tháinig deireadh le maoiniú na hirise le déanaí ó Fhoras na Gaeilge. Ba mhaith liom fiafraí den Aire an mbeidh sí sásta an cheist seo a thógáil ag an chéad chruinniú eile den Chomhairle Aireachta.

I thank the Minister for her answers. I am sure that she will be aware that, in Ulster, one of the main vehicles for the publication of poetry in Irish is 'An tUltach', a 90-year-old magazine. Foras na Gaeilge recently ceased funding that magazine. Will the Minister challenge that decision at the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in language format?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for his question. I will certainly raise the issue of 'An tUltach' at the next NSMC meeting. I would also ask Raymond, who has been on the radio and probably raised the issue with the Member, to ask for a meeting with Foras na Gaeilge. My understanding from when I last queried this is that a meeting with Foras na Gaeilge to raise objections has not even been sought. That is questionable, even for looking at new ways in which this publication can be sustained in the new core funding arrangements. I will certainly raise it, but I also advise people from 'An tUltach' to go to Foras na Gaeilge as a first stop rather than asking for support without even going to it. When people genuinely query why support in its current configuration has ceased, the question will be, "Who have you spoken to?" So, in my opinion, not speaking to anybody is leaving 'An tUltach' wide open. However, I am certainly happy to raise it.

## Gaeltacht Bursary Scheme

5. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what level of funding is available to applicants for the Gaeltacht bursary scheme. (AQO 5848/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Up to £580 per person is available to applicants to the Gaeltacht bursary scheme. One of the key priorities of the Gaeltacht bursary scheme is to contribute to tackling poverty and social exclusion. The Gaeltacht bursary scheme aims to give eligible applicants on low incomes an opportunity to attend intensive Irish language courses that are held in the Donegal Gaeltacht during the summer. The intensive nature of these courses helps learners to develop their speaking and

listening skills. This year, at least 100 places are available on the scheme, and I encourage eligible applicants to apply before the closing date of 4 April.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Does the Minister agree that the Irish Gaeltacht colleges provide excellent facilities for young people in the summertime? What plans are there to increase the funding, and does she intend to have some liaison with the Education Minister to try to expand the scheme?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I agree with the Member about the value that the scheme has provided, particularly for children who come from families with very low incomes. As a person who went to the Gaeltacht recently as part of Líofa, I can see at first hand the value of an intensive Irish course to help your speaking and listening skills. I have not gone to any other Minister with this yet, because, at the end of the day, this is a language-development scheme for which DCAL is primarily responsible. I have spoken to some of the sports governing bodies and to some of the other providers about maybe extending the Gaeltacht bursary scheme to try to ensure that we get the maximum numbers possible. It is really an invaluable experience.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagraí. An féidir leis an Aire cur síos ar na critéir incháilíochta don scéim sparántachta Gaeltachta? Can the Minister outline the eligibility criteria for the Gaeltacht bursary scheme?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for her supplementary question. As I mentioned, the bursary scheme is open primarily to individuals who have been signed up to Líofa but particularly those who are on low incomes. It is for applicants or their children who are in receipt of free school meals as provided and approved by the local education and library board; pension credit; income support; income-based jobseeker's allowance; income-related employment and support allowance; the guarantee element of the state pension credit; and support under the Immigration and Asylum Act. Those are examples of the criteria that are laid out for people who feel that they may be eligible to apply for the Líofa bursary scheme.

## Salto Gymnastics Club

6. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any action her

Department is taking in relation to the expansion plans for Salto Gymnastics Club, Lisburn. (AQO 5849/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for his question. Salto has been a real success story in the field of gymnastics. Since it hosted the training camp for the Chinese artistic gymnastics Olympic teams, I understand that there is now a long waiting list of people wanting to join the club and a real need to increase capacity. I saw that myself when I visited the club. The Member is also aware that I had a useful meeting with him and the chief executive of Salto last November to discuss the expansion plans for its facilities.

I know that Salto has engaged with Sport NI and is looking to receive support from its technical unit on the feasibility of the proposed extension. Sport NI is working with Salto to develop a business case. Although Salto has not yet applied for any recent grants from Sport NI's capital programme, I understand that, probably after going through all the technical work that it needs to do, it will do so in the near future.

**Mr Craig:** I thank the Minister for that answer. It is not only a massive local success in the gymnastics field but a regional, if not UK-wide, success in that field. There are over 800 on the waiting list, Minister, as was discussed at the meeting. It is imperative that it gets the expansion that it requires. Will the Minister give the House an assurance that she will do everything in her power to find the funding for that expansion?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Member knows that I am supportive of Salto, but Salto, like any other group applying for funding, has to go through due process. So, despite my support for Salto, it would be totally inappropriate to say that I will find the money. However, the Member will appreciate that I have been very supportive of Salto. I have visited the gym on several occasions, and I have no doubt that I will be back in the future. I wish it well in its successful endeavours and its application.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Before I call any further supplementary questions, I point out that this is a constituency-specific question. A number of other such questions are on the list today.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí an pointe seo. A recent Audit Office report highlighted some

shortcomings in Sport NI's involvement in the funding of major capital projects. What procedures is the Minister putting in place to make sure that those are not repeated?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for his supplementary question. As a member of the Culture Committee, he will have had sight of the recent Audit Office report, although he may not be familiar with all its details. That report was critical of Sport NI's handling of a major capital project. My Department has been assured by Sport NI's accounting officer that it is implementing the recommendations of the report and applying the lessons learned. Sport NI has an established track record of delivering quality sporting facilities at a community level, with appropriate project management practices. Significant changes have been made in Sport NI as a result of a governance review since the St Colman's project was taken forward. I can assure the Member that that will be the rule rather than the exception from here on in.

## Lough Neagh: Fish Stocks

**7. Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the health of fish stocks in Lough Neagh, including Atlantic salmon, eels, Pollan and Dollaghan trout, in relation to the impact any decline may be having on the local fishing industry. (AQO 5850/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The health and long-term sustainability of the Lough Neagh fishery is a key priority for my Department. The status of fish stocks is vital, and I have commissioned the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to extend our research programme throughout the catchment area.

There is a significant body of data on Atlantic salmon as a result of our commitments to the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation. The salmon population across the North has been in decline, and I recently introduced new conservation legislation to protect salmon stocks. The European eel stock is also in decline and, to comply with EU requirements, we have developed an eel management plan for the Neagh/Bann catchment. The implementation of the plan and the associated eel restocking programme is contributing to the achievements of all those targets.

**Mr Agnew:** I thank the Minister for her answer. Through the various research programmes that are being carried out, have the Minister and her Department been able to ascertain any cause

for the depletion in some of the fish stocks in the lough?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** There are a number of factors, and I am really reluctant to point out one because the one that you point out will look like the main problem. The factors include global warming, domestic and commercial pollution and overfishing. I would also suggest that a lack of respect for the loughs and river ways and not maintaining and sustaining the riverbeds to encourage the better growth of fish stocks are further reasons. There are many more factors.

I am reliant on the AFBI report to set out not just the causes but specific recommendations. Europe has asked us to comply with its requirements, and I want to make sure that they are implemented so that the stocks are not only maintained but grow.

**Mr McMullan:** Will the Minister outline the rationale behind DCAL developing a fishery management plan for Lough Neagh?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** As I said to the previous Member, there have been a range of pressures on Lough Neagh, and the catchment-based fisheries management plan is key to ensuring that all fish stocks and habitats are managed and developed responsibly. That will help to meet the full potential of the fishery and will benefit the local communities around the lough shore, the local economy and the ecology of the lough, which is a primary concern for many people.

The plan will also take into account and complement existing initiatives, such as the EU eel management plan, and look at other statutory and regulatory requirements, such as the water framework directive. The fishery management plan will also be underpinned by robust scientific evidence. That is why it is really important that the fishery management plan for Lough Neagh is as robust as possible. It should not just look at the fish stocks but at the lough as a growing and vital aspect of the local economy.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That ends the period for oral questions. We now move to the period for topical questions. Question 1 has been withdrawn within the appropriate time frame.

## **Líofa: Ulster-Scots Equivalent**

2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for the level of expenditure by

her Department on the Líofa project, including the current advertising campaign, and to outline an equivalent, new and additional initiative that she would consider sponsoring for Ulster Scots, given that the House will be aware of her personal commitment to Líofa. (AQT 922/11-15)

**2.30 pm**

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Sorry, is the Member talking about Líofa?

**Mr Humphrey:** Yes.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** OK. I will get the Member the up-to-date figures. As of this week, they will have changed. I have consistently asked the Ulster-Scots Agency and, indeed, the ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots, to put forward a similar programme, because I think that it would add value to what they do already. I have been waiting since September 2011 for such a programme to come forward. I ask the Member to use whatever influence and encouragement he can, because it is really important that people from the Ulster-Scots community see not only ministerial support for but ministerial investment in such initiatives.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister for the reply. Can I have an assurance from her that, if a project equivalent to the Líofa project for the Irish-language community here in Northern Ireland comes forward for the Ulster-Scots community across Ulster, whether it is for language, history or culture, it will have her full support and receive financial and staffing resource?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I have already spoken to people from the Ulster-Scots community, and I appreciate that the language pressures are not the same. We are comparing spuds and apples. We need to look at culture and heritage, which are very important. So many times, I have offered my support and encouraged initiatives to come forward. The door is still open. I am still waiting for projects to come forward. I can assure the Member and other Members who have an interest that I will look at any initiatives that come forward with a view to giving them full support.

## **Boxing: Funding Roll-out**

3. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the roll-out of £3 million funding for boxing clubs across Northern Ireland. (AQT 923/11-15)



**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I will give the Member a written response, but the update is that there is well over £12 million worth of need because boxing has been left in such a sorry state for decades. It will take £12 million, and then some, to bring boxing facilities into the 21st century. The clubs that needed the money most got it first. Most in the boxing community understand that and are going through a process of getting themselves project-ready. I am trying to get more money into boxing. I am also trying to work with local government so that councils give some support. Thus far, Belfast City Council is the only part of local government to do so. I really support boxing, as the Member knows, and I am keen to make sure that more money is invested, because the sport needs it.

**Mr Anderson:** I thank the Minister for that response, and I note her comments on the sorry state that boxing was in for decades. The Minister should be aware that there are serious concerns in the boxing fraternity about how the money is being distributed. How does the Minister respond to assertions that funding targeted for boxing is being used to fund GAA clubs, much to the anger of the boxing clubs?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am delighted that the GAA has a staunch supporter in the DUP. Fair play to you, Sydney. I understand that the Member is holding up a 'Sunday World' article, which I think is, taking care to respect parliamentary language, untrue. I do not support money earmarked for boxing going to the GAA — it has to go straight to boxing facilities — and I do not think that it happened in that case. I want to see the outcome of questions that I raised with Sport NI on that, but I can assure the Member and other Members that the money is earmarked for boxing, and boxing alone. It is not earmarked for GAA or any other sport.

## **Culture and Arts: DCAL Investment**

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, on a much happier note, whether she plans to invest in the obvious culture and arts that exist, not just in Derry but beyond, given that, up in the north-west, they are still revelling in the success of the City of Culture and, in recent weeks, a young girl called Rachael O'Connor from Drumsurn, Limavady has charmed millions of people across these islands. (AQT 924/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I thank the Member for his question. He will know that I am a recent and frequent visitor to Limavady, Dungiven and Coleraine, not just the city of Derry. I appreciate the rich cultural fabric of the city and

surrounding communities. As part of ensuring the legacy of the City of Culture, I am investing. This year, we are looking at festivals in Limavady and sports facilities for Dungiven and Coleraine, but we are not done yet. We are looking at what we can do this year, with a view to rolling it out into next year and the years after that.

**Mr Dallat:** The Minister has focused on sport, but she will, of course, realise that Rachael's performances on 'The Voice' indicated that there is more than sport in the north-west. Could I press her further and ask whether the cultural aspect of it has been addressed?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The cultural aspect has been addressed and will continue to be addressed. It is about supporting young artists like Rachael. I have said it before: it is a city that sings, but it is a region that sings. And not only singing: we had the Rory Dall harp school in the Long Gallery last week. I have met other harp schools and festival providers. Young groups are coming together through pop music. I have also met piping groups, marching bands and Irish traditional groups. You have a good cultural thread out there. Apparently, it all emanates from the word "céili-ing", which starts in most communities. I was, I think, a good advocate for the City of Culture last year. I will continue to be a strong advocate this year and in the years after, and that includes the whole of the north-west, not just the city of Derry.

## **Boxing: Professional and Project Management Fees**

5. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline whether the professional and project management fees for the £3 million allocated to boxing clubs are similar, greater or less than in other areas. (AQT 925/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I need to get a breakdown of exactly what the professional fees were. I expect that to come in response to the queries that I have raised as a result of an article in a paper on Sunday. We invested in making sure that there were good technical appraisals of the needs because we needed to get structural engineers in to do an independent assessment of how bad or how poor boxing clubs were. They were very busy. The conditions are well below what is fit for purpose, to my shame. It should also be to the shame not only of previous CAL Ministers but of local government. They have let the boxing community down disgracefully. If it means spending that money

to stand the boxing community in good stead, I am prepared to do that.

**Mr Campbell:** The Minister is saying that she will examine that and the newspaper report. Will she, as she has said, stand up for boxing, try to ensure the appropriate funding to ensure that it comes into the 21st century and then take steps to correct what, she said, was the inaccurate information in the newspaper report?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** Absolutely. Particularly when it comes to boxing, in the past and recent past, there have been inaccurate stories about what is happening within the boxing family and the boxing community. The Member and other Members can accept what I am saying here today. I am not using the boxing money as a way of getting money to the GAA; that is not what it is about. This is money to go to boxing to look at boxing facilities and for capital investment; it is not money for any other sport. All those other sports are entitled and have a right to come and ask like anybody else. It is money for boxing.

I will correct the story in the paper, and I assure the Member that I will give him a detailed account and breakdown of where that money was spent. However, I know that the money has paid for a good assessment of the needs of the clubs, which has already provided details to show that we need at least £12 million to correct the shoddy conditions that our boxing community — the sport that yields us most medals — now trains in. It is disgraceful.

## Foyle Valley Gateway Programme

6. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the legacy funding for the Foyle Valley Gateway programme. (AQT 926/11-15)

Mindful of the tone of John Dallat's question and the fact that the Minister acknowledged Derry as a city of song, I was tempted perhaps to sing my question, but I decided to spare everybody.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** You are all in good form today. The Foyle Valley Gateway programme, as the Member knows, has received at least £2 million from DCAL. That is part of an overall programme that has also applied to the social investment fund and Derry City Council. That is one aspect of the Daisyfield and Showgrounds programme, which is part of an overall programme for the Brandywell. Without wanting to prompt the Member's next question, I am assuming that that is where this is going.

We have put some investment in, but we are not done yet.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I call Mr McCartney for his anticipated supplementary question.

**Mr McCartney:** I thought that you were going to say, "for an encore", but I will just ask a supplementary question.

The Minister has sort of anticipated the question. It is important that we get some sort of detail, particularly on sports development and the funding that the Minister can expect to bring to the north-west — and I mean the north-west.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I gave an answer about Daisyfields and the Showgrounds. I appreciate that that is part of a wider programme that will be available from 2015 and beyond. I have already asked Derry City Football Club, and I know that it will talk to the IFA about subregional development. As well as that, in the north-west, I am looking at a centre of sport and inclusion in Dungiven, a multisports facility in the Coleraine area and the development of creative hubs and a language hub in Strabane. We are not done yet, but we are looking at the entire north-west.

I am absolutely delighted that the Member did not sing. The poetry, albeit that it was done beautifully, was enough for one day.

## Artefacts: Appropriate Storage

7. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to comment on the current provision of storage facilities across Northern Ireland for valuable artefacts, given that she will be aware that, this morning, the news carried a story about a number of Northern Ireland artefacts, many of which cost millions of pounds to be dug up, being stored in bags and boxes across the Province. (AQT 927/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The Member will be aware that that falls within the Department of the Environment's remit under, I think, PPS 6. Irrespective of that, I can tell you that, during the boom years, a number of private developers had a responsibility for excavation and, as a result, discovered what they thought were artefacts. They may certainly turn out to be artefacts. The conditions in which they seem to be being stored are far from satisfactory. DCAL's role, via the museums, is advisory, but we certainly need to look at the long-term sustainability of artefacts and at how they are displayed. I believe that how they are displayed

is something that this morning's story was hinting at. I am waiting for a report coming from that, but, as I said, DCAL's role is purely advisory at this stage.

**Mr Ross:** The Minister referred to waiting for a report. Can she give the Assembly more details of who that report is from, who it will be addressed to and what potential actions she envisages taking to ensure that, if we have artefacts that are of particular interest to Northern Ireland, they are stored and presented in a fashion that will be of interest to the public?

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** The report that I will ask for will be on what people think that DCAL's role is and what it should be. Let us be frank about this: I am not going out looking for work. I have enough work to deal with, with very little money to do it, so, I am happy to let Mark H Durkan do the work that he can with advice from the museums. Certainly, I will contest some of the assertions that have been made about DCAL's role in preservation, and I am happy for the museums to be used in their functionary role for advice and preservation. That is where it starts and ends.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Mr Chris Hazzard is not in his place. Mr Tom Elliott is not in his place. I call Mr Alex Maskey.

### **Boxing: Future Funding**

10. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to continue to work with Sport NI and the boxing fraternity to identify any gaps and help the clubs to get the capacity that they need for the future and to secure additional funding, given the over-demand for the resources that she has available. (AQT 930/11-15)

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister for being the first and only Minister in these institutions over a long number of years who has become a champion on behalf of the amateur boxing fraternity, a much-needed sport with a very strong community.

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** I am happy to do that. I continue to work and liaise with the boxing community. Last week, there was an event in Andersonstown Leisure Centre: Belfast versus Spain. Clubs from across the community and outside Belfast came to support that event. I spoke to a lot of the boxing clubs there, and they fully understand the process. They are not happy that their club is not there yet, but they

certainly understand the process and are supportive of it. I am supportive of Sport NI's endeavour to ensure not only that the money is there but that it is well spent. However, we need to get more money in to help the boxing community.

2.45 pm

## **Education**

### **Schools: Common Funding Formula**

1. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Education what mitigation measures he is proposing for schools that are set to lose out financially under the common funding formula indicative budgets for 2014/15. (AQO 5859/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** On 13 March, after careful consideration of all consultation responses, I announced my final decision on changes to the common funding scheme (CFS). I maintained from the outset that this was a genuine consultation. I was delighted with the level of response received and have listened to the views expressed by all who took time to respond. I have amended a number of my initial proposals, taking into account concerns raised but also ensuring that the key principle of targeting increased resources at social deprivation remains.

I confirm that no school will receive less funding this year than it would have done had I made no changes to the formula or budget. I have, therefore, made available a transition fund for schools whose budget under the new arrangements is less than they would have received had the budget and formula remained the same as in 2013-14. Schools have received notification of their delegated budget for the incoming financial year.

**Mr Swann:** I thank the Minister for his answer and for recognising that the first common funding formula did not work and needed changed. Does he recognise that the transition fund that he has put in place and its short-term nature make it hard for principals to budget into next year and the following years?

**Mr O'Dowd:** That is the nature of the budget system. I will not know the Education Department's budget for 2015-16 until the Executive agree it. Therefore, I can make no commitment to any education sector, whether schools or education and library boards, beyond the current financial year. I assure the Member that I will endeavour to secure

whatever funding I can for the provision of education in the future. I will take a serious look at a transition fund going into the future for schools that may have lost funds as a result of the changes that I have made. However, it is worth noting that, with regard to the amounts that schools are losing, the maximum is £11,000, and 86% of the schools that are losing are losing less than £3,000. A pupil at a school carries an average value of about £3,300. Therefore, if a school loses a pupil from one year to the next, it has to deal with that loss as well. I have made a commitment for this year, and I will endeavour to do everything that I can for the years that follow.

**Mr Rogers:** Minister, you are right that all schools got their budget. Can you explain why, in some board areas, they got a complete breakdown of their budget but, in other board areas, they did not?

**Mr O'Dowd:** No is the answer to that question. I have provided all the information to the boards, and I have published information on the Department of Education's website. It is the responsibility of the boards to notify each school of its funding allocation. How each board carries that function out will be a matter for each board, but I am of the view that full information from the very start is the best way forward.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister remind Members why reform of the funding formula was necessary and how it relates to his commitments in the Programme for Government?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for her question. Members will recall that I was not satisfied that the existing common funding scheme was fit for purpose and did not believe that it matched our policy requirements or the need to tackle social deprivation and raise educational attainment for all our young people in schools. I set out with that objective, and that objective remains. As I said in response to the original question, I have taken on board responses to the consultation and concerns raised throughout the consultation, but the primary objective of directing more funds towards schools dealing with high levels of social deprivation remains. Those schools have received that money. I have also committed to putting in place tracking to ensure that that money is spent to reduce educational underattainment for all our young people, and those measures will be announced in due course.

**Mr Allister:** The Minister said that he could not anticipate next year's budget, but does he accept that the natural outworking of the formula that he has adopted will, in the absence of ongoing transitional aid, result in significant loss for many schools in the future?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not accept that there will be significant losses for schools going into the future. I remind the Member of my answer to the question: 84% or 322 of the 385 schools that are losing money will receive less than £3,000 in the transitional fund. They are losing less than £3,000 this year. Ninety-three per cent — 357 schools — will receive less than £5,000 in the transitional year. Therefore, no school will lose a significant amount of money as a result of the changes that I have made. I have committed to ensuring that all schools' budgets will remain the same, as if I had not made significant changes to the common funding formula. However, the Member will well know that no Minister standing at the Dispatch Box is able to predict what their budget will be for 2015-16.

## Schools: Self-evaluation

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to help embed a culture of self-evaluation in schools. (AQO 5860/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Self-evaluation leading to sustained self-improvement is central to my school improvement policy. Self-evaluation should be an integral part of the school development planning process, with actions and targets set out in school development plans.

In 2010-12, the chief inspector reported that many schools were performing well and had a strong focus on improvement. However, I recognise the need to ensure that there is continued focus on actions to promote improvement, which includes school development planning and self-evaluation.

To support schools with that, the Department has produced and disseminated guidance on effective school development planning. The Department also provides schools with data to inform self-evaluation and to help schools identify areas where improvement is required. In addition, education and library boards provide training to schools and school governors on school development planning and effective use of data.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) continues to promote a culture of self-evaluation in schools. It has provided a resource for schools called Together Towards Improvement. This tool supports self-evaluation of the quality of the educational provision. Through inspection, the ETI assesses the effectiveness of a school's self-evaluation processes and identifies good practice or where improvement is required. Together Towards Improvement gives transparency to the inspection framework and promotes a common language for school evaluation and inspection.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagraí. I thank the Minister for his answer. How is self-evaluation reflected in the school development planning process?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. Self-evaluation is an integral part of the school development planning process, with actions and targets set out in the school development plan. There is a statutory requirement for schools to prepare and periodically revise their school development plan, and regulations set out the matters to be addressed in the plan. It is essential that school governors, the principal, the leadership team and all staff demonstrate a commitment to engagement with and involvement in the development planning process. Boards of governors should monitor and review progress against the plan. As I said, the Department has provided guidance to support schools in the preparation and implementation of school development plans, which assist in school evaluation.

**Mr Kinahan:** I fully appreciate the good guidance that is given on self-evaluation. However, will the Department actually help schools with some form of resources or even finance so that they can use third-party advice on self-evaluation?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I hesitate to state that it is not self-evaluation if a third party is brought in, although I accept the principle that the Member is trying to make. We are lucky that the vast majority of school leaders, teachers and principals are dedicated to the profession in which they are involved and see their role as more of a vocation than a job. Many schools have demonstrated how self-evaluation should take place. The ETI shares best practice when it is observed with other schools. Therefore, the ETI also allows for assistance in a third-party

role in that regard. My Department has issued information to schools to allow them to self-evaluate. Therefore, good practice is going on throughout the system. It is important that we give credence and respect to school leaders and boards of governors to allow them to develop their school development plans.

**Mr Campbell:** If, through school development plans and self-evaluation processes, we end up with a situation like there is in Macosquin Primary School just outside Coleraine, where a very effective and productive principal is finding difficulty with the board in trying to ensure that capital expenditure is spent by the board to develop a nursery school, what can the Minister do to assist?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am reluctant to comment on an individual case that I have no details about. I suspect that the issues are not related, although it is a clever way to introduce a school in the Member's constituency to the discussion. I suspect that school evaluation, the school development plan and the provision of a nursery unit are not all connected, nor is the capital. School evaluation should continue, regardless of discussions between a school and the education board about future capital developments at that school.

### **Primary Schools: Computer-based Assessment**

3. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education how he will take forward the recommendations of the recent report on computer-based assessment in primary schools. (AQO 5861/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** John Harkin and Jonathan Hudson conducted the review and presented me with their report at the end of last year. As I made clear in my statement of 11 March, I am content with the findings of the report and have accepted the recommendations. Although challenging to and, at times, critical of all the parties involved in delivery, overall the report is fair, and acceptance of the recommendations will feed constructively into the ongoing policy review. The recommendations include reviewing the technical delivery options, moving the management of computer-based assessment (CBA) to C2k, setting clear timescales for future CBA policy and procurement and clearly articulating the benefits of the policy. I have tasked my officials with taking forward that work. The independent review report is now available on the DE website.

**Mr D Bradley:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra.

The OECD report and the independent review mentioned by the Minister highlight the mistrust among schools and the failure by the Department and CCEA to consult meaningfully. Will the Minister now give the House an undertaking that he will listen to the views of teachers and take serious account of them?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I assure the Member and the House that I will take and have taken into account the views of teachers and schools on the computer-based assessment policy. Indeed, it was as a result of taking on board those views that I suspended the statutory implementation of computer-based assessment in schools for the second year running. We are now running it on a pilot basis.

Last year, around 185 schools took part in a pilot. That was very beneficial to the further development of the technical issues with computer-based assessment. This year, the pilot will be used to develop the policy position on computer-based assessment. Lessons have been learned about computer-based assessment, and the Hudson/Harkin report has further interrogated that. I have instructed my officials to implement the lessons learnt from it.

**Mrs Overend:** Will the Minister inform the House what measures he will put in place to ensure that schools have the necessary time to properly use computer-based assessments?

**Mr O'Dowd:** We introduced a centrally procured computer-based assessment on the basis that it would save schools the money and time needed to seek out and procure individual assessments. A significant number of our schools use commercially available assessments, and that is referred to in the OECD report. Indeed, it was touched on in the CBA report as well. Those assessments, though useful, do not meet the needs of our curriculum. Although they are somewhat useful to our schools, I believe that we should further interrogate centrally procured computer-based assessment. There are questions. Who will deliver that? What will it look like? How long will that procurement remain in place? We need the answers to those questions to minimise pressures on our schools either in the procurement or the delivery of computer-based assessments.

**Mr McCarthy:** I understand that the Minister recently said that he hoped that uptake would continue on a voluntary basis. Will he advise the House whether any schools have signed up to this?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member is correct: in my 11 March statement to the House, I said that we would run a further pilot scheme this year. Some 185 schools signed up to the pilot scheme last year. Early next month, CCEA will announce details of the pilot and will ask schools to sign up to it at that stage.

**Mr I McCrea:** The Minister has referred to the report's recommendations. Will he outline a timescale for when, he feels, the report can be considered and recommendations brought forward so that principals and schools can introduce something that is fit for purpose in the 21st century?

### 3.00 pm

**Mr O'Dowd:** During the last procurement exercise and the delivery of this project, one of the key mistakes made was that it was rushed. People steamed ahead towards a deadline, and, at some stage in that rush, there should have been a call to stop and evaluate where things were going. I do not want to make that mistake again.

A number of lessons learned from, and recommendations in, the Hudson and Harkin report are already being implemented. We are examining the way forward on those. At this stage, I am more concerned about getting computer-based assessment right. Rather than finalising the procurement exercise or making it a statutory obligation on schools, let us get it right and then move towards procurement and making it a statutory obligation, if need be, once again.

### Schools: Hollywood Newbuilds

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Education when the newbuilds of Priory College, Hollywood Primary School and Hollywood Nursery School will commence. (AQO 5862/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The gross capital budget for the Department of Education for 2014-15 is £183.4 million. The majority will be used to develop and improve the schools estate through capital allocated to major works, minor works and school enhancement projects. The budget will also be used to fund youth services, transport,

ICT, early years and a number of other capital requirements.

As 2014-15 is the last year of the current comprehensive spending review period, the amount available for the capital budget for subsequent years has not yet been decided. As I am committed to providing better facilities for our children and young people to learn, bids for capital funding will continue to be made through the budgetary process, to ensure an improved working environment for teachers and other school staff.

To date, I have not announced plans to deliver a newbuilds for Priory College, Holywood Primary School or Holywood Nursery School. A process is under way in my Department to assess options for a potential further major capital announcement. This process will not conclude until late spring or early summer 2014.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his answer and continued interest in the Holywood schools project. Does he recognise that Holywood Primary School is growing and that Priory College is working hard to increase its numbers, which is a difficult task considering that they are in crumbling buildings while competing with other modern schools in the wider North Down area?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his supplementary. I accept the need for newbuilds in the Holywood area. My difficulty is matching newbuilds, not only in Holywood but throughout the jurisdiction, against my limited capital budget. I have also resisted, time and time again, announcing lengthy lists of capital builds that I am not convinced can be delivered within a reasonable time. It has to be said that, even when we do that, we run into unexpected capital build delivery problems. Whether the problem is planning, site purchase or Japanese hogweed, all can delay building programmes.

I am working on a new announcement to move forward the building programme. If any Member's school is not included in that list, I say this to you: we are now involved in a rolling capital builds programme. There will be no more one-off announcements and then escaping for a number of years. I am committed to a rolling programme of capital builds over the next years of this mandate and into the next. We need significant investment in our schools estate, and, even with limited resources, we can make a difference.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that this question is constituency-specific, and the supplementaries must relate to the original question.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. Will the Minister give an overall assessment of his capital budget for newbuilds over coming years?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I will intervene on this occasion. That has absolutely no relation to the original question, so I will move on.

## **Pupils: Pupil Assessment**

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Education how he plans to make the new end of key stage assessments fit for purpose. (AQO 5863/11-15)

I hope that that question is relevant.

8. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Education how he plans to build teachers' confidence in the pupil assessment process in relation to levels of progression. (AQO 5866/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5 and 8 together.

The OECD report was extremely positive about the synergies between our evaluation and assessment policies, saying specifically that the rationale behind the development and implementation of levels of progression was:

*“sound and congruent with European practice.”*

In building an assessment process in which we can all have confidence, the Department is continuing to reduce the pressure, real or perceived, on schools. This allows us to restate the primary purpose of the new arrangements, which is to assist teaching and learning and not simply to provide data to the system for accountability purposes.

As a result of feedback from teachers in the 2012-13 year, for example, changes were made to the arrangements for 2013-14, including slowing down the pace of change, reducing the workload for teachers and removing the March return date for pupil portfolios. Further work will be taken forward and discussions will continue as the arrangements evolve. This engagement

will be fully inclusive of schools, teachers and their representatives.

**Mr Dallat:** I marvel at the Minister's optimism. These Key Stage assessments are going down like a lead balloon. Can he tell the House what is wrong with the current Key Stage assessments, which inform teaching for the future?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The new Key Stage assessments that are being introduced were returned by 75% of schools in the past year. Although they may disagree with elements of the Key Stage assessments, the vast majority of schools have returned them. The purpose of introducing new ones was to align them with our curriculum and to ensure that we were measuring the correct matters, including measuring results against our current curriculum and not against the previous one. That is why there was a need for change.

My Department and I have been involved in detailed negotiations with representatives of teachers' organisations, and we have continued to make progress. I have shown teachers a willingness to take on board their concerns, but, as with any negotiation or discussion on the way forward, you cannot have it all your own way.

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with teaching unions on this matter?

**Mr O'Dowd:** My Department, together with CCEA, conducted a review of the end of Key Stage arrangements last year, as we committed to doing. This consisted of 10 face-to-face workshops with school leaders. That review was completed in 2013, and I considered the feedback and agreed recommended changes. I asked officials to engage with teachers' unions on the issue, and that process is ongoing. Following that engagement, I wrote to schools clarifying the way forward for 2013-14 and beyond. My Department is reducing the pressure, real or perceived, as I said, on schools in this matter.

Part of my reason for bringing in the internationally respected OECD was to have a look at our assessment arrangements from an international perspective. The OECD said that our assessment procedures are fit for purpose. Where we fell down was on the initial engagement with teachers' unions and representatives, and I have now corrected that. There is a meaningful, full engagement with

teachers and teachers' unions on the way forward.

**Mr Cree:** The Minister appears to be in denial on this. Given the concern over the current Key Stage assessments and the fact that the Committee was less than lukewarm about them, will the Minister urgently pilot a new Key Stage assessment system to replace the discredited one?

**Mr O'Dowd:** If I was in denial about this matter, I would not have made any changes to the assessment procedures whatsoever, I would not have reviewed the assessment procedures after one year and I would have made no changes to the procedures. The fact that I am not in denial means that I have done all those things and engaged constructively on them. We have made changes and we are making progress on this matter.

Which assessment procedure would the Member like me to pilot? There are several opinions out there about what assessments should look like, whether there should be assessments and whether assessments should take the form of a single statutory test at the end of each year so that you work to those results and move forward. There is no universal agreement on this island or beyond. The OECD reflected on that as well. There is no universal agreement on the way forward for assessment at the end of Key Stages, but the OECD said that our assessment procedure was fit for purpose.

## Schools: Attendance

6. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Education to outline the truancy rates in each education and library board. (AQO 5864/11-15)

10. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Education what support or guidance his Department provides to schools on the need to tackle pupil absenteeism. (AQO 5868/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 10 together.

Schools record pupil attendance electronically on the C2k system. My Department's circular 2013/13 on attendance guidance and absence recording by schools, which was issued to schools in June 2013, provides guidance and strategies to manage pupil attendance. It also provides the codes that should be used for each category of absence.



The term "truancy", although familiar, is not used. However, five types of absence are categorised as unauthorised absence. Those categories are: no reason provided for absence; family holiday that was not agreed with the school; other absence, where the reason that is provided is not acceptable, such as shopping or a birthday; no reason yet provided for absence, which is a temporary code; and late, after registration closed.

The unauthorised absence rates in each education and library board area for the 2012-13 school year were 2.5% in the Belfast Board area; 2% in the Western Board area; 1.7% in the North Eastern Board area; 1.8% in the South Eastern Board area; and 1.8% in the Southern Board area.

Responsibility for ensuring that pupils attend school rests with parents and guardians. Last year, my Department issued 'Attendance Matters: A Parent's Guide' to the parents and guardians of all year 1 and year 8 pupils. This year, the leaflet will be given to the parents and guardians of all pupils. My Department has programmes to support vulnerable groups, such as school-age mothers, newcomers and Travellers. I have also asked my officials to develop a policy on looked-after children. My Department also funds the Education Welfare Service (EWS). If a pupil's absence is causing concern, or if their attendance rate is less than 85%, the school should refer to EWS for support, if appropriate.

**Mr Newton:** I asked the question because I was concerned about reports outlining the number of children who are being taken away from school to go on holiday outside the normal times. Is there an initiative in schools or in board areas to address that problem?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As I said, we have issued leaflets to all year 1 and year 8 pupils, and this year we will issue them to all pupils and parents to let them know about the need for children to be in school and unacceptable reasons for absence. A child can go on holiday with his or her parents if it is agreed with the school. Certainly, parents should not take children out without agreeing it with the school. So, initiatives are in place, and schools also have a responsibility as part of their development programmes for tackling absence and supporting attendance, as do the boards through their work with the welfare officers.

**Mr Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Does he see, as many of

us do, that there is an important role for the wider community in tackling issues such as absenteeism in schools?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Of course, and, as with any aspect of education, it is vital that parents, families and the broader community are involved and show themselves to be supportive of education and its benefits. Indeed, where problems persist, schools should be talking to parents and engaging with them to establish why children are absent from school and whether there are underlying reasons for that, such as bullying, problems at home or whatever it is that is keeping a child away from school. All those things should be interrogated.

I also recently announced and launched funding for community initiatives for further engagements between schools and communities, re-emphasising the importance of education. That message can be effective only if a child is in school being educated. The most important action that any parent can take is to ensure that their child is in school and to work with the school to support the child through their education.

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

## School Enhancement Programme

1. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Education how his recently announced school enhancement programme will benefit local schools and the wider economy. (AQT 931/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for her question. During Question Time, I was asked about my capital budget and how we would use that most effectively moving forward. In recent years, we have introduced the school enhancement programme, which will allow us to invest between £500,000 and £4 million in a school to improve its facilities. It also allows us to stabilise some of the schools estate, ensure that schools can be maintained properly and ensure that teachers and pupils are working and being taught in proper facilities.

### 3.15 pm

I will give the Member examples of the work that will be carried out. I will be parochial and go to my own area. Ceara School in Lurgan, which is well known, will receive five new classrooms as a result of this. Millington

Primary School will receive new classrooms, new parking facilities etc. Friends' School, Lisburn, will be provided with a new music and maths block, a refurbished history department and a maintenance workshop will be removed. That has a value of about £3 million, and it is £1.5 million or so for the Ceara project. That is a significant investment, but it is also a significant investment in our economy, in the construction industry and in jobs.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. Indeed, he answered my supplementary question about significant investment.

## Education and Skills Authority

2. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Education whether he feels that the creation of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) remains a realistic prospect, given the urgent need for the reconfiguration of the education and library boards in order to converge with RPA. (AQT 932/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Whether it is a realistic prospect or not, the Executive will have to make a decision about where the journey will take us. Following the lengthy debates in the Assembly last week and the approval of the Local Government Bill to move forward with the reshaping of our local councils and the reduction from 26 to 11, I am now faced with a situation in which our education and library boards are no longer configured to those board areas. Therefore, unless significant decisions and significant changes are made, our education and library boards will be acting ultra vires come May 2015. Decisions have to be made. People have resisted ESA for a variety of party political and, I suspect, personal reasons, but they need to set those things aside and come to a conclusion on what we will do with our education and library boards.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra go dtí seo. Does the Minister feel that the ESA Bill would have been supported by the education sectors and stakeholders?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I can only go by the comments from the vast majority of the education sectors that they are supportive of moving forward with the ESA Bill. In my opinion, I have acted — politicians will always be challenged on these matters — responsibly. I made significant concessions to a number of

sectors to ensure that the Education and Skills Authority could move forward. However, every time I made a concession, another demand was placed on the table, and that leads me to suspect that either political parties or individuals were deliberately blocking progress on the ESA Bill despite its being a Programme for Government commitment.

## Education: Business of Education Survey

3. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Education whether he is familiar with the survey report launched here yesterday, 'The Business of Education', which was a survey of Northern Ireland business leaders and does he have any comments to make on its findings. (AQT 933/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The only familiarity that I have with the report is what I read in this morning's media, and I suspect that the Member is referring to the apparent support for integrated education from the business sector. That has to be welcomed. They may already do this, but I challenge those sponsoring the report and say that the best way to support integrated education is to send your child to an integrated school.

**Mr Lunn:** Luckily, I have a copy of the report that I am happy to pass to the Minister. The findings are heavily in favour of what the report calls the desegregation of our education system as a means of strengthening cross-community relationships in the workplace and having a positive impact on economic growth. Coupling that with the other surveys that are regularly produced in favour of integrated education, is the Minister satisfied — I ask him this once again — that his Department is doing enough to encourage and facilitate integrated education as required by statute?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As I said, I have not read the report, but I do not think that anybody would argue against the desegregation of education and the breaking down of barriers in our society. Indeed, the shared education report gave us opportunities to move that debate forward and has kept it flowing.

Let me answer the question in this way: I am always looking for new opportunities to ensure that we are living up to our statutory obligations on integrated education and ensuring that we are promoting and facilitating it. I can give you recent examples of where I have approved significant enrolment: in Enniskillen Integrated Primary School and in a number of other areas.

Unfortunately, for integrated education in Portadown, the primary school came forward with a proposal, and I rejected it. The only reason I did so was that the site, for which I have approved a newbuild, was not big enough for the size of school that was envisaged. That would have meant that I would have had to delay capital investment in that area, and I would have delayed the building of a new integrated school. My suggestion was that the school go away and look for a site for a second integrated school in the Portadown area. That is the best way forward for that area. It is not the case of denying integrated education there; I am promoting a second school, and I am going to build a brand-new building for the original school. So, there is a significant investment, and we are moving ahead with it. However, as I say, there is responsibility on all Ministers to look for new ways of delivering their services.

## Area Learning Communities

4. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Education how his Department is addressing the needs of young people who are challenged by the normal school environment, while acknowledging the contribution that area learning partnerships are making to shared education and to providing educational opportunities to young people. (AQT 934/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am very supportive of area learning communities and the partnership, and indeed the sharing, that goes on among schools in those areas. Recently, I received a report from my permanent secretary and his team, who had visited all the area learning communities. That report was supportive of some areas, critical of others and presented challenges to the Department of Education in others, which we will analyse and move forward on.

As to how I support children who find the school environment difficult, we support EOTAS, education other than at school. That ensures that there are facilities for children who cannot attend school, for whatever valid reason, and that they have an educational venue to go to. However, I think that every endeavour must be made to ensure that a child attends their host home school. That is the best way forward for children, but I accept that there is always an exception to the rule.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Given that schools are planning their curriculum for September, what assurances can the Minister give that funding for this extremely valuable project will be in

place? Has he brought this to the Executive to ensure that funding is targeted so that all schools and colleges delivering the programme can get on with doing just that?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member refers to the implementation of the entitlement framework, which schools were funded for, over several years, up to the value of around £9 million per annum. That funding was due to come to an end — if my memory serves me right — in the 2013-14 financial year, or perhaps it was in the 2014-15 financial year. Despite the very restricted budget that I have, I agreed to continue that funding on a lesser basis of £4.5 million. I will examine my budget to see whether we can support that for the next number of years, or to see how best we can support schools in future. I will engage, as will all Ministers, with my Executive colleagues on the education budget for 2015-16. I will put forward a very strident argument that education needs increased investment.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Question 5 was withdrawn within the appropriate time frame.

## Schools: Common Funding Formula, Irish-medium Value

6. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the increase in the value of the Irish-medium factor in the common funding formula. (AQT 936/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Consultation responses led me to decide to significantly increase funding to post-primary Irish-medium education. There have been ongoing discussions and reports, particularly from our only stand-alone post-primary school, Coláiste Feirste, on the significant pressures that it faces in delivering the entitlement framework through the medium of Irish. It has no partnership schools to work with through the medium of Irish. There were responses from a variety of sources, some for an increase and some opposed. On balance, I decided that a significant increase was merited to ensure that we live up to our statutory obligations on Irish-medium education.

**Mr Sheehan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Having spoken to the governors of Coláiste Feirste, I know that they face difficulties. Can the Minister confirm that the consultation process clearly showed up specific needs in the Irish-medium post-primary sector that require additional support?

**Mr O'Dowd:** Not only did the consultation report show it up but, going back to Sir Bob Salisbury's initial report, on which I based my initial consultation on the common funding formula, he and his team suggested that it should increase to somewhere around £289. Through the consultation, Coláiste Feirste put forward a strong case. Other schools with Irish-medium units attached raised this matter, and a number of the education boards responded, in favour and opposed to the increase. On the basis of the evidence before me, I decided to increase the funding to Irish-medium education.

### **SEELB: Fit for Purpose**

7. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Education whether he considers the South Eastern Education and Library Board to be fit for purpose, given the controversy around its decision to amalgamate Knockbreda and Newtownbreda high schools — a decision brought forward by a board run by three commissioners, with no democratic input. (AQT 937/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The simple fact of the matter is that the South Eastern Education and Library Board would not be in existence if we had ESA, and there would be democratic accountability on ESA. All the sectors would have been represented on the board, and everyone would have had their voice heard during the decision-making process.

The Member's party and individuals in the party opposite have blocked ESA at every turn. So you end up with retaining the South Eastern Education and Library Board run by commissioners. As Minister, I had a Programme for Government target to establish ESA in 2013. Why would I have stood down the commissioners and put in a fully functioning board? That would not have made sense. Now, as Minister, I am faced with the reconfiguration of 26 councils into 11. I have to reconfigure the boards to fit that, so why would I stand down the commissioners ahead of that? If you are wondering why there are no elected representatives making these decisions, perhaps you should look at yourself in the mirror and say, "Decisions that I have made have stopped that."

**Mr McGimpsey:** That was a very convoluted answer, which appears to suggest that the Minister does not think that the board is fit for purpose, but he is quite happy to use the situation in an effort to bring about a body that has no prospect of coming forward at the minute. ESA has no prospect at the moment.

Surely it is incumbent on the Minister to get rid of the commissioners and democratise a body that evinces all the worst aspects of direct rule.

**Mr O'Dowd:** For the record, and to ensure that there is no doubt in your mind, I believe that the South Eastern Education and Library Board is fit for purpose. However, I also believe that the democratic way forward is to have an education body with elected representatives on it. I am a democrat; I believe in that. It is convoluted because it has been a very convoluted journey, I can assure you, as someone who has travelled the journey of ESA.

If Members had supported a Programme for Government commitment to establish ESA in 2013, I would have been legally bound, as Minister, to have worked towards that. ESA has been blocked; ESA has been stopped. I am now looking a situation where councils are being reconfigured. Why would I stand down the commissioners of the South Eastern Education and Library Board ahead of a decision on what the boards or board will look like in the year ahead? That would not make sense and it would not be a best use of public time or resources. Indeed, I suspect that it would take me several months to reconstitute the South Eastern Education and Library Board. By the time I would have achieved that, I would be into having to change the boards to match the new council boundaries. So, let us do this in a sensible way and move on with it.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up. That concludes Question Time. I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments to allow those who were contributing to the earlier debate to take their place.

**3.30 pm**

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

## Private Members' Business

### Religious Belief and Worship: Worldwide Freedom

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the persecution of Christians in many countries around the world and, in particular, the threat of execution of 33 Christians in North Korea for their beliefs; and calls on HM Government to exhaust all diplomatic options and influence to secure greater freedom of religious belief and worship throughout the world. — [Mr Wells.]*

**Mr Allister:** I totally support the motion and commend Mr Wells for his proposing of it and the manner in which he laid out the issues. It is certainly very clear, I would have thought, to us all that, in far too many places across the world, people of Christian belief are required to live not just in the most harrowing of circumstances but under the most dire persecution. For those of us in this part of the world who have never experienced anything like that, it is, surely, hard even to comprehend. Yes, we have had blatantly sectarian incidents — far too many of them — such as the deliberate gunning down of worshippers in the hall in Darkley, but, as a community, we generally enjoy a level of freedom, be it religious or otherwise, that people in many of these countries can only dream about. Sadly, the Assembly debating these issues is unlikely to face at all some of the most repressive regimes, such as that in North Korea, which subjects its people to this persecution. That does not mean that it is not right to debate it, but I think that we recognise how immune from reason and even compassion such regimes are.

It was encouraging to hear the support from across the House. It was disappointing that, predictably, from Ms Ruane we had something of a divisive rant about all sorts of things. She went back to the penal laws and long before that, colonisation and everything else. She told us that Sinn Féin was very much against the death penalty. It is a pity that they did not tell that to their friends before they executed Jean McConville and many's another who was subjected to summary execution.

One of the growing concerns across the world is the intensifying intolerance and violence, emanating particularly from Muslim regimes. The level of oppression and persecution under which Christians are being required to live in many Muslim countries is quite, quite shocking.

It is our bounden duty to do anything that we can to raise our voice in support of these people, not just in the likes of North Korea and the more obviously extreme Muslim countries and regions in which this is a problem but in countries such as China, where there have been far too many incidents of the denial of human rights, including that of the freedom of worship.

Of course, we, in the west, very readily do business with such countries. When I was a Member of the European Parliament, I often raised issues such as this with the commissioner who looked after foreign affairs. While there was always empathy, one always got the impression that it was tempered by the desire not to upset trade opportunities and all of that. Indeed, in this House, we have had OFMDFM go to China. I trust that they took opportunities —

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

**Mr Allister:** — to raise, in a robust manner, concerns about human rights there, because, there too, there are big issues to be addressed.

**Mrs Foster:** I thank virtually everybody who has contributed to the debate. I thank my colleague for opening the debate. I apologise to him and the House for not being here at the start. I was going to say "unfortunately", but fortunately I was at a jobs announcement this morning so, unfortunately, I could not be here at the beginning of the debate.

On Sunday evening, I took the opportunity to attend evensong in St Macartin's Cathedral, where the Archbishop of Armagh was in attendance and gave the sermon. It was his first visit to the cathedral, and he took the opportunity to remind us of T S Eliot's play 'Murder in the Cathedral', not that there was any murder in the cathedral that evening; I just want to make sure that I say that. In that play, T S Eliot makes reference to the fact that:

*"Humankind cannot bear very much reality."*

What we are confronted with in North Korea and all the other places that have been mentioned in the House today is the harsh reality that persecution against Christians is taking place on a daily basis.

I want to thank Open Doors, the organisation that does so much good work in our national Parliament. It was also able to provide information to us for today's debate. I thank

Open Doors for its continued work across the world in highlighting the persecution and being able to tell us about how, unfortunately, that persecution against Christians has been increasing and becoming more intense in more countries across the world. Of course, North Korea is number one on its watch list. That is a world ranking that we know of. We watch the increasingly bizarre actions of North Korea's current leader. We should be increasingly concerned about what is happening in that area.

Article 68 of the North Korean constitution provides for freedom of religion, but it is restricted and must not be used as

*"a pretext for drawing in foreign forces or for harming the state and social order."*

In North Korea, the only real ideology is the veneration of their leader. We are all aware of the consequences if you do not venerate that leader in the way that they see fit.

North Korea remains the most difficult country in the world in which to be a Christian. Christians, like others in that country, have had to survive under a very oppressive regime. In contemporary times, they have had to deal with corrupt officials, bad policies, natural disasters, diseases and hunger. They must also hide their decision to follow Christ. Being caught with a Bible is grounds for execution or a lifelong political prison sentence. An estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Christians live in concentration camps, and we heard from Mr McIlveen what that actually means for those people.

We tabled the motion as we wanted to highlight what is going on, particularly in North Korea with the 33 people who were, at that time, sentenced to death. We do not know whether they have been murdered at this stage, but we wanted to highlight it. It is right that we, as an Assembly, sometimes step away from our own difficulties and reflect on what is happening in other parts of the world.

I welcome the fact that, on 5 March 2014, my colleagues at Westminster tabled an early day motion in the House of Commons on North Korea. As the motion indicates, we call on our national Government not just to note what is happening but to look at action. I was encouraged when I read the response to the question for oral answer on 4 March 2014 from Minister Hugo Swire, whom we will all be familiar with, as he used to be in Northern Ireland. He is now a Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and he said

in his answer that, where North Korea was concerned, our Government are:

*"actively supporting a strong UN Human Rights Council resolution".*

We welcome that, but we want to see more action. We ask that, from this House today, a very strong message goes to our Government that the Assembly abhors the persecution of Christians in North Korea and right across the world.

I also welcome the fact that his colleague Hugh Robertson, who is also a Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in his response to a Member asking a question said that he takes the opportunities to visit Christian communities, whether they are in Egypt or in Algeria. That is a very tangible way of showing support to Christian communities who may feel under threat or are actually being persecuted by the authorities. On occasions when I have been on trade missions, I have taken the opportunity to visit Christian communities to say to them that we support them and that we think of them and pray for them in their perilous position.

I also welcome the fact that Mr Lidington, who is Minister of State for European issues, believes that we should continue to monitor violations and that we are using our extensive range of contacts right across the world in our high commissions and embassies to continue to monitor what is happening in the various countries. Of course, the embassies are there for a variety of reasons, but I was glad to see that, on 16 April last year, Mr Lidington confirmed to the House of Commons that the embassies monitored very closely what was going on with the persecution of Christians in the territories where they are. That is a positive move, and I welcome it. We urge government to continue to take action on the persecution that continues.

We need to look at the world and not just think about what begins and ends in Northern Ireland. I thought that David McIlveen's contribution was very personal and very moving when he said that we could not dehumanise the people who have been persecuted or, indeed, have lost their life for their Christian beliefs. That is very important.

The one discordant note came from Cairíona Ruane, who, with her usual rhetoric, failed to address the issues in the motion. She did not see any irony at all in the fact that she told us all that Sinn Féin was against the death penalty, despite the fact that the IRA has meted out the

death penalty on many, many occasions here in Northern Ireland without impunity in the dark of the night, shooting people in the back of the head. Apparently, that is OK, but she can lecture us on the Floor about being against the death penalty. That is quite incredible. The fact is that her mind is so narrow and so closed that every speech has to come back to an attack on the Democratic Unionist Party. I regret that. This motion was about much, much more than that; it was about sending out a message to our Government that we wanted action taken in relation to the persecution of Christians right across the world.

Seán Rogers mentioned that there are many missionaries in the field, and I think that it is important that we mention that. As we sit here in the comfort of the Assembly, we should remember them, particularly those who are in some of the most difficult parts of Africa.

I hope that those of us here will remember that.

### 3.45 pm

I want to finish with a quote from the Bible: Matthew chapter 5, verse 10:

*"Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

We should remember in prayer those who are being persecuted, but also urge the Government to take action to let them know that they are not forgotten and that what they do in the name of Christ is respected in this part of the United Kingdom. I support the motion.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the persecution of Christians in many countries around the world and, in particular, the threat of execution of 33 Christians in North Korea for their beliefs; and calls on HM Government to exhaust all diplomatic options and influence to secure greater freedom of religious belief and worship throughout the world.*

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### Creavery Primary School

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. All other Members who are called to speak will have approximately six minutes.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for being available today. I know that it is short notice and that this Adjournment topic had to be called off the last day. I am pleased that the Minister is here to listen to the debate.

I should declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Creavery Primary School since 2005. I am coming at it from that perspective.

At the outset, I want to talk about Creavery Primary School to set the scene. I think that all the Members for South Antrim have visited the school during the past number of months, and probably longer, and have shown support for the school. That is a testament to the good educational standards in Creavery.

For your benefit, Mr Deputy Speaker — you are not from the area — Creavery Primary School is a small rural school between Antrim, Randalstown and Kells, with an enrolment of approximately 68 children and growing. However, the reason for the debate is that there are problems with the accommodation.

The other thing that I want to do at the outset — I know that I am not supposed to do it but I will do it anyway — is to put on record that I have noticed that the principal of the school and the chairman of the board of governors are in the Public Gallery. That is a testament to the dedication of the principal and the board of governors and their interest in the school and the education and welfare of the children who attend it.

While I am on the subject, I also want to put on record what excellent teaching staff we have in the school. One of the testaments of that is the performance of the children of the school in academic selection tests. I know that that is a bone of contention for some, particularly the Minister, but it is enshrined in law and people are entitled to do a transfer test of sorts. It is

interesting to note that each and every one the children who decided to sit the test came out with very high marks and will have no problems in entering the grammar school. Although that is not entirely important, and it is not necessarily important to the Minister, it demonstrates to me, as a representative for the area, the good quality of education in that small rural school. It also suggests why some people travel a distance to get to it. I know that we are going through area planning and that the Minister will have his own thoughts on where their vision should be and where they would like to be. However, one thing is key in Creavery: parental choice has been expressed, and the results are testament to the excellent teaching in the school.

However, we are not here to talk about the results or the teaching staff. Over the past few years, the board of governors of the school has shown frustration with the North Eastern Education and Library Board and its unwillingness to be proactive in looking to the future. As I said, we have a school with increasing enrolments — indeed, there has been a variation in the number of enrolments, and requests have been made on a number of occasions to try to increase them. Again, that is down to the parents, who have chosen an excellent school.

The problem that the teaching staff, the principal and the board of governors have is that we are bursting at the seams and some of the accommodation is not fit for purpose. In particular, we have one mobile classroom that has long since passed its sell-by date. The conversations over the past couple of years with the North Eastern Education and Library Board were the driver for this Adjournment topic. There is a frustration for many of us that the North Eastern Education and Library Board has waited until the eleventh hour to secure leases for the future viability of the school. We are all aware of a development proposal for the school to give it better accommodation so that our children are in the best-equipped classes and not in poor accommodation. It was with that frustration that I asked for today's debate, but since the Adjournment topic was requested, I know that the MP for the area has had discussions with the education board in County Hall about renewing those leases.

I have to say, through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to the Minister, that it is sad that the North Eastern Education and Library Board waited until the eleventh hour. One of the leases is due to run out this year. I am certainly not here to attack you, Minister. We are actually using your good office to see what pressure you can

apply so that we can continue to have a very good school in our constituency of South Antrim.

As I have said, it is disappointing that the board has waited so long. We have a mobile classroom that has been leaking over the past number of months, and we have had numerous temporary repairs. I do not think that any of us would want to send our children to an educational setting such as that. Although it is not the most important thing, I have noted that we had a meeting in the principal's office some weeks ago, attended by the Member of Parliament, the chairman of the board of governors, myself and the principal, and there was virtually no room. I think that we all had to stand up to let each other move. That gives you an indication of the cramped conditions that the principal and her secretary are working in while achieving very good results for the school and doing an excellent job. I do not think that that bodes very well for how her staff should deliver for the future. Also, as regards dining facilities for the staff as well as the pupils to enjoy their lunch, the accommodation is non-existent.

A few months ago, my colleagues from South Antrim, Pam Cameron and Danny Kinahan, had a meeting with Roads Service about another Creavery issue. With it being a rural school — as I said earlier, all Members have been there and have shown their support for the school — it is set on a fairly narrow road. Twice during the day, we have long queues of traffic and there is no opportunity for it to enter the school. One of the excuses from the North Eastern Education and Library Board in the past has been that, because of the leases and the fact that they have not been proactive, nothing can be done about that. What we are asking for today is an assurance from the Minister to see what he can do in his good office so that we can continue to deliver quality education on a site that is fit for purpose.

There was another example of how the site has fallen into disrepair just before Christmas, when the school invited various Members of the Assembly, particularly the ones from the Education Committee at that time. I had occasion to go that day with another party colleague Mrs Brenda Hale, who took the opportunity to go, on the invitation of the principal, and see around the site as a member of the Education Committee. It was disappointing, because there we had someone who is not directly connected to the school and could be seen as an outsider or visitor coming to the school on its invitation to see the accommodation, and the first thing that struck



Brenda that particular day was an awful smell. The reason I say that is that we even have a problem on the current site with the septic tank. Again, the problem has been there for some time. The education board is familiar with the problem and has failed to do anything about it.

As I have said, the real impetus for the discussion today is to flag up the issue. When I first proposed the topic, I had a phone call to say that some were concerned about the way I worded the topic and the fact that it was the future. I want to put it clearly on the record today — I can surely speak for myself and my party colleagues — that we want to ensure a good future for the school, the staff and the pupils and the continuation of the good educational outcomes that we have had in that school. To deliver those, we need modern facilities and accommodation so that the teachers are not expected to deliver that education in poor buildings and accommodation.

I am pleading with the Minister today to look at the issue. I know that your party colleague spoke to you about it because I had a conversation with him, and I know that we have Mitchel's support. Today, we ask you to do what you can as the Minister of Education to help us to help the children in South Antrim, particularly in Creavery. We ask you to give us a good-quality school so that we can continue. If parents choose to send their children to that school, we can increase its numbers.

I have not had permission to do this — I am sure that I will not get into too much trouble — but I extend an invitation to you, Minister, to come to Creavery and see the buildings in which our children are being educated and the standard of the facilities. I am sure that you are aware of the outcomes and results of the quality education that they receive. I invite you and Members for South Antrim to attend the school at a time that suits you to see what the North Eastern Education and Library Board has been doing — or, in this case, not been doing — so that we can continue to move Creavery forward.

**Mr Mitchel McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I endorse Trevor's comments and his description of the conditions for the children who attend the school and their teachers.

I want to talk about the educational experience of the children because I think that it is remarkable. I do not think that it is just a case of people rising to the challenge of adversity; I see commitment, dedication and vocation over and above the curriculum requirements. The

teachers ensure that the children are given a grounding for life. It is very difficult to quantify or measure that or build it into the criteria for sustainability. It is difficult to put that into an area planning process even though those are the essential foundation stones of an education service across the region. This school is an exemplar, which is not, in any sense, to pass judgement on schools that I have not had the privilege of visiting. I have been at the school on a number of occasions, and that is the impression that I come away with.

I park on a narrow country road, which is what all who visit the school and parents collecting their children have to do. It is a school that has served generations in the area but is not in the ownership of the board of governors or the education and library board. The school is leased from Lord O'Neill. I attempted to talk to Lord O'Neill to see whether he could help us to resolve that anomaly. However, what I find more than contradictory in how we map out strategic development processes is that the issue of the lease on this school has yet to be formally resolved. That makes it difficult to be able to say with any confidence that there is a commitment to it.

The fact that the school falls below the thresholds, and I am sure that the Minister will take the opportunity to comment on that, does not necessarily mean, in a rural context, that it is automatically surplus to requirements. In addition to the rising numbers, the fact that parents choose to send their children to this school, and will drive the necessary distance to deliver them in the morning and collect them in the afternoon, demonstrate that it has a future.

My comments are based on a fairly realistic view of how we as an Assembly have to support our Executive, who in turn have to work with the education authorities to ensure that we deal with the fact that there are 85,000 surplus places in our schools estate. However, the quality of education has to be a criterion as well, and this school is, I think, an exemplar. Certainly, of all the campuses and schools that I have had an opportunity to visit, this one ranks significantly for me.

That is down to the quality of leadership and teaching staff in the school.

#### 4.00 pm

The parents are responding, and I hope that the Department, and the board in particular, will respond. I am not looking to make any official's job more difficult, but I am beginning to wonder

where, over time, the commitment to the school is. Have we ended up in a situation, contrived or created through neglect, where the very viability of the school is being considered? That completely overlooks the fantastic foundation that those children are being given for their further education and their life. We could not pay enough money for that type of experience.

**Mr Girvan:** I thank my colleague for securing the debate. It has come out very clearly that Creavery Primary School is performing well and producing excellence not because of wonderful facilities but in spite of its facilities. I reiterate that the school was established in 1827 and has a long history of delivering education in the area. I appreciate that the enrolment figures are increasing, as opposed to other schools in which they are going down. Parents are making a choice to send their children to a school that is performing.

We received a report recently through the Audit Committee that identified that it is not necessarily schools with wonderful facilities that achieve. An awful lot comes down to school leadership from the top. Unfortunately, such leadership does not always make its way out of a school — by that I mean to the North Eastern Education and Library Board. The board has dragged its feet on essential health and safety issues that should have been dealt with and repairs that should have been undertaken. My colleague mentioned a mobile classroom that is long past its sell-by date, which probably requires more than just a sticking plaster.

Pam and Danny visited the school recently to look at the roads and the lack of on-site parking. People have to park on a small rural road, which has resulted in major problems.

It is about the education that children receive at the school, something that most parents are proud of. One teacher has excelled in bringing the school forward in science, equipping young people to move on to secondary education with a good grounding in the sciences, which is sadly lacking in a number of other areas. If that starts at primary level, it will work its way through, and you will deliver people who have an interest in and enjoy the sciences. That will maybe drive them down the engineering route, which our country was very good at and really needs to get back to.

Trevor mentioned a number of areas that we need to focus on, including the lease. I appreciate that the MP for the area, Dr William McCrea, has been working with the board of governors to ensure that the lease is at least put in place to give some continuity and security

to families. Although families think that there is a possibility that the lease will not be there, people will vote with their feet because that message is being sent out by stealth. I do not believe that any of these things happen by accident. There are those behind the scenes who manipulate to achieve their own agenda. Unfortunately, it does not always work out that that agenda is for the betterment of the community.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Girvan:** I will indeed.

**Mr Clarke:** I accept what the Member said with regard to people voting with their feet. However, you will accept that, in this case, parents have been very supportive of the school. Instead of them voting with their feet, the school is actually bursting at the seams because of its good educational outcomes. Instead of deciding to take their children out, they want to bring their children to the school, even though the conditions are bad. This is really about the North Eastern Education and Library Board getting its act together.

**Mr Girvan:** I thank my colleague. That is exactly the point. On many occasions, people vote with their feet. However, because of the excellence that they receive at the school, parents have a commitment and a buy-in and, as a consequence, it is full to capacity. That is something that we take great heart from. Communities are built up around schools. They are more than just centres of education; they become hubs for communities, and we hope and pray that that has some longevity to it. To ensure that that happens, it is vital that those messages go out and that there is buy-in, not just from the teaching staff and the families who send their children to it, but from the Department and the North Eastern Education and Library Board. We want to ensure that education is delivered at that location for the long term. The accommodation that is there needs to be brought up to a standard that not only meets health and safety, but is also future-proofed for the area. I do not think that any of us in the room would say anything different. We are all united, and we have no personal agenda. We want to see the school go forward in the future.

**Mr Kinahan:** It is very good to have the Minister here and to have the chance to speak for Creavery Primary School, which is a real gem. Another Member said that it was remarkable. It is a truly remarkable school, and it really is a gem. I would like to spend the time

that I have to speak showing you some of its wonderful achievements and what it is managing on. However, I also reiterate the invitation. If the Minister has time and can get to the school, we would love to show him the facilities and how on earth it manages such achievements with those facilities. I also call on the Minister to put a little bit of pressure on the board to get its finger out and help the school.

However, if you were to judge the school on the viability audit factors and you were to start in education standards, you would see that it has some of the very highest here in Northern Ireland for a primary school. One hundred per cent of the children who sat the transfer test received the grade that would let them go where they wanted to go and, at the same time, they all got to the school that they wanted to go to, and that is a sign of how well the school is looked at. The school has a science specialism and, from my Education Committee role, I know that the more and more that we learn about the future, the science and technology role is something that we should nurture through all our schools, not just at Creavery but probably using Creavery as the example for all the other schools. With regard to future careers, we are told that 80% of jobs are going to be technical or scientific; therefore, we need to start children off at primary school. Here you have a school that really succeeds almost more than any other.

It is in the top three with regard to parents' participation, and it is a runner-up in working with the local community. It had the UK science teacher of the year in 2011 and 2012, and I was very pleased to have the school up here after that and to share that success with them. It has great plans for the future. Its principal has been selected as an associate assessor. Again, through the Education Committee, we have heard recently how important and how excellent the associate assessor is, not just for the teachers who are doing it, but for sharing with all the other schools that they go to. Therefore, it is very much at the forefront of everything with the schools. I believe that, at the moment, it is working towards getting iPads and things for some of the pupils. It is a school at the forefront. It also shares its sports and music with all the other schools around it. It brings in other groups to visit — the local senior citizens, and everyone else. It really makes the most of being in the countryside. I do not think that you will find other schools that are doing nearly as much as it is doing. Its finances are sound; it has a small surplus, and that surplus is predicted for the next two or three years. With that, it is working its way forward. With the recent changes to the common funding formula,

it looks as though it will get more in the future. I very much welcome that.

You have heard us saying that its numbers are good. I know that the Minister has said that he will not judge things by numbers, but here is a school that was at 68. It will be up to 72, and it would like to move up to 80. To be able to do that, of course, it needs the buildings. It is very likely that it will get to 78 this year.

It was noted in the viability audit that it should look forward for possible consolidation. It does not need to consolidate with other schools so much; it makes terrific use of working with them. It has worked with Carnaghts Primary School and found its way forward. It has done some work with St MacNissius' Primary School. It is also looking at doing some work with Antrim Primary School in the future. Here you have a school that really is trying to do everything that is being asked of it and is succeeding and doing it better.

However, as others said, it needs to have its lease sorted out. I have to declare an interest as a good friend of Shane O'Neill. I would not put any pressure on him other than to give him a quiet nudge and say, "Come on, let us have a good deal for this school". Many schools have leases. It should not be seen as something that works against a school. It should maybe be seen as the way forward.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kinahan:** I will certainly give way.

**Mr Clarke:** On that point, I understand your friendship with Shane O'Neill. The debate today is not about the person who holds the lease. It is about the inability of the North Eastern Education and Library Board to make those approaches to make sure that the lease is in place. We would not want it to be implied that we were making derogatory comments about the landowner.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you very much. That is a very good point. The lease is up shortly, and we are told that it will be done only on a year-to-year basis. We want to see a proper long-term lease. As I was saying before I took the intervention, we have plenty of examples of really successful schools, particularly in the Irish-medium sector, that pay on long-term leases. That is what we should be looking for.

I was really trying to get the point across that here you have a school that is quite excellent. Let us make sure that we use it as an example

for others and build on it. I could go on: I have pages and pages of notes and details about why this school is so special. We need to get the lease sorted out quickly; get the car parking worked out; try to get the road safety sorted out; and then get the buildings. Here you have got a gem of a school.

**Mrs Cameron:** I also thank my party colleague for making sure that the debate happened today.

We are always conscious of the ever-present conflict in education between providing parental choice, ensuring access to the best education for children and establishing value for money for the taxpayer. I believe that Creavery Primary School exceeds those expectations and provides high-quality education, which gives taxpayers great value for money by being open and accessible to all in the community and allows parents choice, not just of where their children will attend primary school, but in post-primary education.

Creavery Primary School has been at the heart of the rural community in South Antrim since its founding days in the 1800s. In this age of falling enrolments, the school continues to grow. It has the highest level of enrolments in recent years and has had to develop a waiting list for entry. That is evidence that parents in that community value the education that is provided by that school.

Although small, the school has had a high level of achievement in recent years. It has been recognised as a specialised science school, which is an achievement that was given only to one other school in Northern Ireland and, in 2011-12, it won the UK science teacher of the year award. Aside from that wonderful achievement in its own right, it helped the school to secure over £8,000 of external funding to enhance the learning experience of those who attend the school and of those in the community.

Creavery Primary School was also placed in the top three schools for achievement in parental participation. The Department has been placing increasing media focus on that area. As we know, the more involved a parent is, the more positive the outcome for the student. The school is a prime example of a learning community, which has been a focus of the Executive in recent years. This school has embraced that cultural initiative to ensure maximum benefit for potential and existing pupils. It regularly partners with neighbouring schools, such as St MacNissius' Primary School, Carnaghts Primary School and Antrim

Primary School. Additionally, it has strong links with post-primary education through partnership working with Parkhall college. I believe that that shows the school's commitment to working in a learning community for the benefit of the community and pupils.

#### 4.15 pm

One of the school's main benefits is that it is a rural school catering for rural children; the nearest school that can provide such a service is five miles away.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mrs Cameron:** I will indeed.

**Mr Clarke:** It is interesting to hear you set the context again. I apologise for rising so many times, but I was struck by what you said. Some of us have had an opportunity to go round many schools and to attend PTA events. This school's PTA events have also been recognised. On my first time at the school, I learned that it runs a barbecue. One of the things that struck me is that a school in an urban setting would not get nearly as much buy-in from the local community as Creavery gets in a rural setting. So, the school also plays an important role in providing activities outside school in a rural setting.

**Mrs Cameron:** I thank my colleague for those comments, and I wholeheartedly agree with them.

I was pleased to note that, in 2014, 100% of the pupils who sat the unregulated transfer test gained results that allowed them to access the post-primary school of their choice. In 2011-12, all children transferring from the primary school achieved offers of places in their first-choice post-primary school. That indicates the high level of achievement that the school constantly delivers and the regard in which the school is held by the local community in general and the educational community in particular. The educational assessment of the children's ability is shown by report to be true, fair and accurate. That allows post-primary schools to place the children in the appropriate learning environment.

Schools are not just about the children who attend them. In my view, it is important that a school is the hub of the community. Football should not be confined just to those who have children attending the school, and I believe that this school has embraced that ideal by catering for the community's wider needs. Some of the

opportunities that the school represents to the community include, to name but a few, bumps and buggies, craft and craic, and ladies and men evenings. That work was recognised by PTA NI when the school became a runner-up in the working with the local community award.

The school may be a small rural school, but it has a large heart and soul. So, rather than looking to relocate the school, it should be recognised that it is central to the rural community. Moving the school to another site, closing it or amalgamating it would risk undoing all the positive work that the staff, pupils, parents and board of governors have worked hard to achieve. It is my hope that the authorities can build on the school's success by assisting further progress and ensuring that its access roads and parking facilities are safe for children, parents and residents alike. I wish the school continued success.

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome this debate, because it gives me an opportunity to make some points about local issues, statutory responsibilities and strategic issues in education.

First, I will look at responsibilities. All of us, as MLAs, must represent our constituents, and an important part of that is bringing forward concerns about our local schools. However, we must consider who does what in the education sector. Where does responsibility for particular issues lie? I mentioned that very recently when we discussed the Newtownbreda/Knockbreda amalgamation by the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

Creavery Primary School — did I pronounce that correctly? — is a controlled school, and its maintenance is the responsibility of its managing authority, the North Eastern Board. That means that neither I nor my officials has any direct role in fixing the issues that Members raised today. I will explain that further, however. In fairness, many Members mentioned this, but responsibility lies with the board. Members have brought this issue to my attention in a bid to get me to raise it with the board as well, and I have no difficulty with that.

Although the focus today has been on one school, I will take a moment to highlight the bigger picture. The sustainable schools policy has set out criteria for a network of viable, sustainable and educationally sound schools. The policy is being implemented through the area planning process. It will result in major changes in the education landscape and will

affect schools across the five existing education and library board areas.

I often say that area planning is about the pupils rather than the institution. I have said that I want viable and sustainable schools, but that does not mean an automatic cull of small schools or, indeed, of small rural schools that are below the enrolment threshold. It does mean, however, that we must look critically at such schools and ask whether it is really in the pupils' interests that they remain.

As Minister, I must decide on all development proposals that are brought to me, and I will consider each on its own merits. I hope that Members will also think about that bigger picture. I hope that we will have debates about wider, strategic issues, as well as about specific cases, and that we look at the interests of our pupils collectively as well as in individual schools.

Mr Clarke covered some of the points on area planning. Members will be aware that I commissioned the process of area-based planning and asked the education boards, in conjunction with CCMS and working with the other school sectors, to produce a single strategic area plan for the boards. The primary area plans were published in March last year, and the public consultation was open until the end of June last year.

Turning specifically to Creavery Primary School, the primary area plan that was published for public consultation proposed that a:

*"Local area solution ... be explored to include consideration of consolidation with another school on a site to be identified."*

The reason provided for that was that there were more than two composite classes in a single classroom and only three teachers. The sustainable schools policy recommends that there be no more than two composite classes in a single classroom and that there should be a minimum of four teachers.

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Minister for giving way. That cuts to the core of the issue — the fact that we have composite classes in the school and that it has the accommodation of the size that it is. Had the North Eastern Education and Library Board done what many of us would expect and let the school grow, we could have had more teachers and less possibility of classes such as you referred to. As Mr Girvan said, it is as if the board sometimes does this for other reasons and actually causes these

problems. We have a school that has applied for increased enrolment over a number of years. The school could grow much more, which would address those issues. However, the fact that the North Eastern Education and Library Board is not willing to act is inhibiting the school's growth.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I take on board the Member's comments. A number of Members referred to Creavery Primary School's enrolment also being below the recommended sustainable schools policy threshold of 105. However, I have made my position clear on many occasions that a school's future is not in jeopardy simply because of small enrolment numbers, and many Members here have referred to the quality of education provided at the school.

Education boards are revising the primary area plans, taking account of the consultation responses. The revised area plans are due to be submitted to my Department this spring. Education boards are the statutory planning authority for schools and the managing authorities for controlled schools. If the board wishes to make a significant change to the school, such as expansion, closure or amalgamation, it must publish a development proposal. I make the final decisions on all development proposals, considering each case on its merits and taking into account all relevant information. Were such a development proposal to be published, I assure Members that I would be more than happy to engage with them in regard to it. It is not appropriate, therefore, for me to comment on the future of any individual school, as I would not want to prejudge the outcome of any future potential development proposal.

I am also aware of issues regarding accommodation at the school, and I understand that the board is considering a minor works scheme to address accommodation and parking deficiencies at the school. I am advised that those proposals are at detailed design stage.

As you may be aware, and as was mentioned, the site of the school is leased from two parties, and I appreciate the concern regarding the expiration of those leases. For the minor works scheme to progress, it is essential that the board have assured access to the site for an acceptable period. To achieve that, the board and landlords need to reach an agreement on the terms of any new lease. The board has informed me that it is considering this matter, and, as I mentioned earlier, Creavery is a controlled school, the maintenance and lease of

which are the responsibility of the North Eastern Education and Library Board. My officials and I have no direct role. However, I assure Members that I will raise the concerns raised in the debate with the North Eastern Education and Library Board and seek further clarification around all of them.

I am also more than happy, if the school wishes to write to me, to consider visiting it. I am aware that my diary is pretty hectic until the end of May, but if I am available afterwards or before, I am more than happy to facilitate a visit to the school as well. Thank you very much.

*Adjourned at 4.24 pm.*

## WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

*The content of this ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the Official Report (Hansard) process.*

### Regional Development

#### A31 MAGHERAFELT BYPASS

*Published at 4.00 pm on Tuesday 25 March 2014.*

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):**As Members will be aware, funding for the A31 Magherafelt Bypass was approved by the Executive in July 2013. I now wish to inform Members of my decision to proceed with this £40 million strategic major works project, with the making of the necessary Vesting Order and Commencement of Procurement for the scheme.

Following the public inquiries for the scheme the decision to progress the scheme was announced in September 2010. At that time the Environmental Statement Notice to Proceed and Direction Order were published, however, it was made clear that the timing of the making of the necessary Vesting Order would be subject to the normal budgetary process.

When developing major road schemes it is important that the obligations placed on the Department, by national and EC Habitats legislation, are fully considered. Part V of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 sets out the statutory requirements for the assessment of environmental impacts of road schemes. Having caused an Appropriate Assessment screening exercise to be carried out, and an independent review of that screening exercise, and having considered the Environmental Statement and the consultation responses to it, I am satisfied that the likely significant environmental effects of the proposed scheme have been properly assessed and have been sufficient to inform judgements on the scheme. Accordingly, in light of the assessment undertaken and information presented within the Statement to Inform the Appropriate Assessment screening exercise and the Environmental Statement, I accept the Department's conclusion (as the Competent Authority) that construction and operation of the A31 Magherafelt Bypass scheme would not by itself, or in combination with other known plans or projects, adversely affect the integrity of any Natura 2000 sites and the Lough Neagh Special Protection Area.

I have carefully considered the Department's Statement and agree with its conclusions. I have therefore decided to proceed with the scheme. In doing so, I commit my Department to carrying out the necessary works to facilitate the Inspector's recommendations and the environmental design measures, as well as the mitigation measures detailed in the A31 Departmental Statement.

Construction of the scheme will provide approximately 6 km of new carriageway between the A31 Moneymore Road at Coolshinney Road, south west of Magherafelt, and the A6 at Castledawson Roundabout, north east of Magherafelt.

The new carriageway runs to the east side of Magherafelt and will provide significant benefits to the road user, with the main objective of the scheme being to reduce congestion within Magherafelt town and to improve journey times and road safety.

As well as benefitting the economy, the scheme will also benefit the local construction sector through an increase in demand for construction materials as well as boosting commercial trade and the construction industry in the surrounding area.

I have asked my Department to make the necessary Vesting Order and to commence procurement. Subject to the successful completion of the procurement process, construction of the scheme is programmed to start late 2014 and is expected to take around 20 months to complete.

Please note the above statement is embargoed until 4.00 pm on 25 March 2014



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