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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 September 2011

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Programme for Government

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to switch off their mobile phones, because they interfere with the Building's electronic systems.

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that good practice in governance is to base a Budget on an up-to-date Programme for Government so that the policy initiatives can inform financial planning; notes that it is now over six months since the Assembly voted on the Executive's Budget 2011-15; further notes the significant economic change in this region since the 2008-2011 Programme for Government was published; and calls on the Executive to publish for consultation a new draft Programme for Government which adequately addresses the economic challenges in the coming years.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Tá an-áthas orm an rún seo a mholadh. A Cheann Comhairle, nó, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle — tá a lán béil d'fhocail ansin. Dá bhféadfaí focail a ithe, bheadh ábhar lóin ansin, déarfainn.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, there are a lot of words in your title, and I said that, if we could eat our words, there would certainly would be a lunch there for someone.

Bhí mé i láthair inné nuair a d'fhoscail Uachtarán na hÉireann an síneadh nua leis an Chultúrlann ar Bhóthar na bhFál. Chonacthas

domh gur eiseamláir iontach an tionscnamh sin den sochar a thig as airgead poiblí a infheistiú sa phobal agus an tairbhe a thig dá bharr. Ním comhghairdeas le coiste stiúrtha na Cultúrlainne as an éacht atá déanta acu ar son na Gaeilge, ar son na turasóireachta, ar son na healaíona, agus ar son na fostaíochta sa Cheathrú Gaeltachta d'iarthar Bhéal Feirste.

Yesterday, I attended the opening of the extension to the Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich on the Falls Road by the President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. It is an excellent example of how public investment can benefit communities. I congratulate the management committee of An Cultúrlann on what it has done for employment, tourism, the Irish language and the arts in the Gaeltacht Quarter of west Belfast.

Two Departments, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, contributed to the cocktail of funding that enabled the project. That spend was a result of the previous Programme for Government, and it illustrates how communities can benefit from well-directed public spending. It also underlines the need for the existing Budget to be based on a revised Programme for Government for 2011-15 and an updated investment strategy that demonstrates how strategic policies drive financial allocations, not the other way around.

We could use many metaphors to demonstrate the role of the Programme for Government in public spending. I suppose that the Programme for Government is the road map that should lead public spending in the direction in which it needs to go to best serve our communities' needs.

The Programme for Government, and the consultation around it, allows for participative democracy and adds to the transparency and openness of government. Those are all positive elements that increase public confidence in

government. We all know that the Northern Ireland Executive have very few levers with which to transform the local economy and set it on a path that will stimulate growth and generate jobs. We are seeking to augment those levers and add a more competitive rate of corporation tax to our economic toolkit, but, as we heard yesterday, that is likely to take some more time.

In the meantime, the main economic lever that the Executive have is public expenditure. We need to use that lever to our best possible advantage, given the deep cuts that we face. Now, more than ever, we need to ensure that we maximise every benefit from public expenditure. The way to do that is through an effective Programme for Government that is flexible enough to respond to changing economic conditions.

Unfortunately, however, the current Executive have no up-to-date policy framework for our public expenditure allocations. It is plain that good practice in governance is to base a Budget on an up-to-date Programme for Government so that policy initiatives can, as I said, inform financial planning. Such a Programme for Government is referred to in the ministerial code, which states that the Executive Committee will agree:

"each year on ... a programme incorporating an agreed budget linked to policies and programmes".

It is more than six months since the House voted on the four-year Budget, and we still do not have a Programme for Government. During the Budget debates earlier this year, the arguments as to why we did not require a new Programme for Government were well rehearsed in the Chamber. Generally speaking, they were framed in the words, "the economy is the priority". However, we need a much more detailed programme than simply one phrase.

During those debates, the constant refrain was that the Executive took the important step of making the economy the top priority and that that will continue. The economy should still be the top priority. However, there has been significant economic change in the region since the 2008-2011 Programme for Government, so there is a need to renew the Programme for Government. In comparison with the summer of 2008, an additional 29,000 people here are now registered as unemployed. The proportion of unemployed 18- to 24-year-olds has risen from 12.1% to 18.3% in the same period.

Significant reductions in our spending have been imposed by the British Government, with total cuts over the next four years representing, in real terms, a decrease of £4 billion compared with the baseline for 2010-11.

As we know, and heard again this morning, fuel prices continue to rocket, and many more people than previously will be faced with fuel poverty. As a result of the coalition's welfare reform plans, we will see a significant negative impact on vulnerable members of society who are in receipt of benefits, and that will have a proportionally greater impact on people in Northern Ireland.

The Finance Minister stated that the Northern Ireland Executive need to decide what their real priorities are, because we can no longer afford to deliver the full range of commitments set out in the Programme for Government. Yet, more than 15 months since the Finance Minister made that statement to the Chief Executives' Forum, we are still without a new Programme for Government.

It is imperative that the Executive publish for full consultation a new draft Programme for Government that does five key things. First, it should tackle the imbalance in the Northern Ireland economy, the under-representation of the private sector, and the fact that existing policies will not provide the momentum required to grow the private sector economy in the long term. Secondly, it should prioritise job creation and build on our strong business sectors such as tourism and agrifood, and take a strategic approach to our capital spend to prioritise the shovel-ready building projects that create most jobs.

Thirdly, we should progress North/South development and save money through new economies of scale, reduce duplication and increase specialisation. With the challenging economic times and a new Government in the South, now is a good time to undertake those projects. Fourthly, I believe in investing in young people's education and development so that society and the economy grow. We must help young people in our schools into training and into work in future growth industries and avoid the prospect of a lost generation. My fifth point relates to the protection of front line services, particularly in health. We should stand up for the most vulnerable by responding adequately

to economic fluctuations, such as increased energy costs, which hurt the most vulnerable.

Those are the broad issues on which we need to focus; my colleagues will expand on them and on others in their contributions. We need to begin forming a Programme for Government, and I hope that today's debate will be the first step in that process. Ba mhaith liom deireadh a chur le mo chuid cainte ag an phointe seo, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Molaim an rún don Tionól. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): First, I thank Mr Bradley and his colleagues for bringing forward the motion. Like other Committees, the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is looking for a proper opportunity to scrutinise any Programme for Government proposals that come forward. It is important that they have that opportunity. That is why I would like to have witnessed some more movement on it, as Mr Bradley indicated, long before now because it takes time for Committees to give it proper thought. I appeal to the Chairpersons of the other Committees to co-operate in the process almost as a collective group, as the Executive should be co-operating on the Programme for Government. It is important that we have a collective response to any proposals.

I would like to see — hopefully this will come forward in the Programme for Government — Departments and the Executive being creative in bringing forward new proposals and new thought processes, and, as many people call it, thinking outside the box, because in these very difficult economic times it is vital that we have new initiatives and proposals. From a Committee perspective, we will look for further engagement with the European Union in particular and with the broader international community in general.

We believe that the Barroso report has not moved far enough or quickly enough and that there may have been a wasted opportunity, because things have not progressed the way they should. However, there are obviously still quite a lot of opportunities in the European Union. I know that research and development is one particular area where there are significant opportunities for the Executive to exploit financial returns for Northern Ireland.

10.45 am

I will now speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party. I have long called for a Programme for Government for this mandate. Before the Budget was set in March, I indicated that I thought that we were putting the cart before the horse because we were setting a Budget without a Programme for Government. I had hoped that a Programme for Government would be established at that time.

Even at this stage, only a few months into the Budget period, we note that the Budget is being changed already. It was changed just last week when student fees were frozen. The Ulster Unionist Party and I accept the fact that some changes and amendments will be needed throughout the Budget period, but unless the Executive take a collective approach and put proper parameters in place for the Programme for Government, all that we are going to do is to make small changes to the Budget at particular times when required. However, if we can set a proper Programme for Government for which there is collective responsibility and to which a cohesive approach is taken, I think that we will be able to have a much more settled Budget. I think that the two will need to work in hand in hand. That is why I believe that, although it is late to be bringing this forward now, it is better late than never.

I am not sure what the junior Minister will say here today. However, I certainly hope that definitive proposals go forward to Committees and parties in the very near future. I know and accept that parties got a draft document a short time ago, and the Ulster Unionist Party has responded to that. If we are to move forward and have a much better decision-making process over the next four years than we had in the previous four, it is very important that we take a cohesive approach and that some of us are not left out in the cold when such decisions are being made.

Mr Humphrey: The Programme for Government 2008-2011 had five key priorities: to grow the economy; to promote tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being; to protect and enhance the environment; to invest and build our infrastructure; and to deliver high-quality and efficient public services.

The main thrust of that Programme for Government was about focusing on the economy, and I think that that was vital and the

correct thing to do at that time. When debating the issue today, we must put into context the situation that evolved from 2008. There was not one Member of the House who could have predicted in 2007 the catastrophe that was to befall the world's economy with the financial collapse in 2008 and the impact that that had on our United Kingdom. Although I was not a Member then, I, too, could not have predicted that. Confidence was zapped from industry as economies contracted and exports reduced, and the global banking system had a massive detrimental effect on money markets and business confidence. In that context, public spending was massively reduced by the new Tory Government to address the outgoing Government's mismanagement of the United Kingdom's economy.

Of course, many in the House complained about the late agreement of the Budget last winter. However, those who accurately recall the reasons for the delay will know that that was due to parties posturing, Ministers staying away from meetings with the Finance Minister and people using the Budget process as a means of electioneering for the forthcoming elections. That did not serve the people of Northern Ireland, and it did not serve the House and its reputation among the public well.

It is right that the new Executive that was formed after the election should formulate a new Programme for Government. Ministers have come to the House continually to advise us that work on a new Programme for Government is ongoing. The paper that has been left in the Library for Members' use makes clear the consistent line of questioning from Members and responses from Ministers.

I agree that it would be ideal if we could reach a position of having a Programme for Government sitting alongside a new Budget and a new investment strategy. That would be ideal for the House, the people of Northern Ireland and the economy. However, the House must remember that we have a five-party Executive. When we look across the water to the mainland, we see the tensions that exist in a coalition Government of two parties. It is vital that all Members across the parties in the Assembly act responsibly and, as far as possible, in a collegiate way, just as they did following the recent positive statement on the freeze on tuition fees. That showed a level of collective responsibility and maturity in

the House that many people out there did not believe could happen.

I understand that the Programme for Government will soon go out for consultation. Yet again, we hear the words, "It will go out for consultation". That process will take some 16 to 18 weeks. Surely it is time that we reviewed the process of having such lengthy consultations. It does not provide or deliver good governance. In times of economic hardship and financial constraint, it is important that the Executive and those who provide leadership and confidence in the House act accordingly. Failure to do so will undermine business confidence even further and erode the reputation of this place even more. As last autumn and winter demonstrated, it will create real fear in the community and voluntary sector. At that time, how many Members had people come into their constituency offices concerned about provision of finance and security of employment for staff in that sector? The sector was very concerned about failure to deliver because, owing to posturing in the House, the Assembly could not agree a Budget.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, in actual fact, some community and voluntary groups are still concerned and still approaching MLAs because they have not received any money for, perhaps, the past eight or nine months, even though the Budget has been set since March? That did not just happen prior to March but continues to happen.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute added to his time.

Mr Humphrey: The Member will realise that the reason that many community and voluntary sector groups suffer those hardships is because the party for which he campaigned cut £400 million from Northern Ireland's Budget over the next four years.

Mr McCallister: Earlier in his speech, the Member said that the new Government had to clear up the mess that had been left by the old Government. He should lay the blame where it is, as he did in the earlier part of his speech.

Mr Humphrey: It was not me who apportioned blame but the leader of your party.

Many people will take the view that failure to deliver the Programme for Government is a

negative return for the previous Programme for Government 2008-2011. Who could have predicted the collapse? No one could have predicted it — not world markets, the World Bank or huge conglomerates.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Humphrey: It is important that the debate proceeds in a mature way, that we have governance —

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

Mr Humphrey: It is important that the Government move forward responsibly, collectively and collegiately in order to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Programme for Government. It has already been said that the Executive have had to deal with a number of challenges, particularly over the past year or year and a half. The £4 billion in British Government cuts and the challenge of trying to mitigate those cuts was the most significant hurdle to overcome. It has to be said that a lot of constructive work has been done and was done at that time to try to mitigate the cuts. The example of using initiative to come up with solutions is what the public expect of the Assembly. The work to counter Budget cuts needs to be ongoing.

It is the job of the new Executive and Assembly to agree a Programme for Government. It would not have made any sense — indeed, it would have been presumptuous — to have set a four-year Programme for Government in the mouth of an election, as other parties previously suggested doing.

I listened to the proposer of the motion, Mr Bradley, and there are number of points that we all agree on. I agree with him about pushing for further fiscal powers to be transferred so that we can take control of our own fiscal destiny, ensure that we can further mitigate the cuts and ensure that they do not hit the most vulnerable in society, as they are doing now.

This Programme for Government also needs to address the big challenges that we face as a society: poverty, deprivation, investment, job creation etc. The economy is a main priority, but so must be the protection of people, especially

the vulnerable in our community, against the negative effects of the current economic situation, which can put grandparents, families with unemployed parents, single parents and many others —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I note that both he and the previous Member mentioned difficulties that the Executive were having with cuts. Those difficulties apply across Europe and in the United States, as the Member will accept. In the South of Ireland, it took only one week for Fine Gael and Labour to agree a Programme for Government. Your party is opposed to the cuts in the South of Ireland, yet it is implementing them here in the North on behalf of the British Government.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for her intervention. The way that Fine Gael and Labour are operating down South quite clearly is not working. That will play out over the next few years. She referred to other European Governments, but this Assembly and Executive are constrained in their powers and in what they can do, which needs to be recognised.

In reference to last year and the events that took place, our party took a position to try to mitigate the impact of the cuts as much as it possibly could. When we were deciding on how to approach the issue of the Budget, our approach was not the same as the SDLP's, which was to put the Budget in place right away across all Departments: our approach was about trying to mitigate the impact of the cuts. In doing so, we identified £1 billion of revenue-raising initiatives to try to ensure that the cuts had less impact on the most vulnerable in our society. As we know, the SDLP had nothing to bring forward in that regard, and it was quite clear in the elections this year that the public recognised our efforts more than those of the SDLP.

The Programme for Government must adequately cover those points and set clear and tangible targets. The emphasis should be on getting it right. We should not have another rush job. At the time of the last Programme for Government, everybody was in agreement that the priority was the economy. Given developments since then, it is clear that that has not changed. I look forward to seeing what the Minister puts forward as a result of the work that has been ongoing over the summer on putting a Programme for Government in place.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the motion and agree that the publication of a draft Programme for Government must be a priority for the Executive. The UK, Irish, Scottish and Welsh Governments have all produced programmes, and the Northern Ireland Executive must now show that they too have listened to the public and have a vision and plan for their community. The mandatory nature of our coalition Government makes that a more complicated task. However, the people who voted us into this Assembly demand that we deliver solutions to the social and economic challenges that we face.

Those challenges are clear and stark. There is a need to attract investment and to encourage indigenous enterprise, particularly export-led, in order to grow a dynamic and high-value knowledge-based economy that will create the jobs and growth that we need. There is also a need to address our productivity gap and economic inactivity by equipping our constituents with the relevant skills to fulfil their potential and gain employment. There is also a need to prioritise opportunities for youth and protection for the most vulnerable, including older people and those in poverty and social deprivation.

The biggest challenge, however, for this community remains the human and financial cost of division. Other programmes for government speak of era-changing, convention-challenging, radical reform and of government guided by the needs of the many rather than the greed of the few.

In a context of budgetary restrictions that are affecting health, education, public transport and other front line services, there is a moral and financial imperative to address an estimated £1 billion a year that is wasted on managing a divided society. For economic recovery and social inclusion, we must make tackling the cost of division more than just rhetoric and make it a genuine priority of a new Programme for Government. We also need concrete proposals. The people of Northern Ireland have moved well beyond satisfaction with political stability rather than violence, and they now demand delivery from the Assembly.

11.00 am

The vision of the Programme for Government for Northern Ireland should be threefold. First, it should be for a shared society; secondly, it should be for a dynamic economy and efficient public services; and thirdly, it should be for

sustainability. The values on which it should be based are inclusion, fairness and opportunity, and the key overarching approaches should be early intervention and preventative spending.

A Programme for Government must have clear objectives with target delivery dates, financial allocations and specific legislative priorities that can be monitored and challenged by interested parties, including, as the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister mentioned, Assembly Committees at regular review periods.

I understand that the Ulster Unionist Party has published Programme for Government proposals. I welcome that. I believe that we should have enough will and, I would hope, wit in the Assembly to work together and agree a robust and effective programme with real outcomes for local people. My party published a legislative programme in May, which, although not exhaustive, also set out specific priorities that, if delivered, would grasp the opportunity to create a devolution that meets the needs of the community.

Our proposals have nine key themes, and the specific legislative proposals for each are available in detail online. The first theme is a shared future, which includes a shared housing Bill; the second is a rebalanced economy with a corporation tax Bill and a renewable energy support Bill; and the third is education and skills, which includes an early education and care Bill to tackle the need for affordable childcare, with a lead Department on the issue. Preschool provision, a shared and integrated education Bill and an education and skills authority Bill are also under that theme. The other themes are modern public services, health and well-being, better government to include the much-needed local government review of public administration and a governance Bill to place a duty on the Executive to co-operate. The themes of having a safer community, a fairer society and a green economy are also included.

There will be other proposals, and I welcome the debate on what exactly the Assembly should do to improve the lives of citizens in Northern Ireland. If the Executive can agree a clear vision, clear priorities and a partnership approach between the public, private and community and voluntary sectors for the Programme for Government, I believe that it is possible to demonstrate that devolution can deliver.

Mr Hamilton: There is no doubt that a Programme for Government is an important if not a vital and pivotal document in any jurisdiction, not least in Northern Ireland. Self-evidently, the sooner an Executive can produce that document as is practically possible the better. To that extent, I agree with the motion. However, the complaints about why it has taken so long to be produced are misplaced.

Mr Lyttle, like others, mentioned that, by its very nature, the system of government that we have, which has five parties in a mandatory coalition, makes it more difficult to produce such a document. Indeed, it is not just five parties in an Executive but five parties with fundamentally different views on a wide range of issues. That makes it much more difficult than may be the case elsewhere to produce a document such as a Programme for Government. That system also slows things down, and we saw that with lots of other major issues that we struggled with over the past four years. I would be happy and I am sure that many Members would be happy to see a different form of government that would speed things up. As far as I can recall, however, the party that tabled the motion still opposes a different form of government that would speed things up. The SDLP cannot have it both ways. It cannot complain about the system that grinds things to a halt on many occasions yet oppose any changes to it.

Mr D Bradley: The Member will recall what I said. We are already six months on from the Budget, and the work has still not been undertaken. There is no point in trying to excuse that by saying that there are five partners in the coalition. We have already wasted six months. Had we used that time productively, we would be almost there with a Programme for Government.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Hamilton: The Member does not have to ask me what has been done in that time. He can go and ask his party colleague the current Minister of the Environment. I am not sure how long he will be in post; he might want to talk to the man to his left about that. The Minister of the Environment has been involved, as have all other Ministers. Indeed, the Member's party leader has been involved in party leaders' meetings. I understand that one will take place today to discuss further the Programme for Government and other issues.

Work has been ongoing over the period. Time has been taken to involve everyone in a much more inclusive process that will ultimately result in a better Programme for Government document than came out of the previous process. Not least, there will be a system for monitoring the many targets, which was a criticism of the previous Programme for Government that we all shared. The question of whether time has been used productively is one about which the Member should have a conversation with his colleague the Minister of the Environment.

Mr Campbell: Does the Member agree that, although we have heard comments about the delay in the Programme for Government and other issues regarding the four-year term, there is a contrast between the events that are unfolding in this mandate and those in previous mandates, when we were in and out of the revolving door at Stormont nearly every other week? Contrasts can be made, and they are not altogether flattering for those who are making the criticism.

Mr Hamilton: The Member, using his experience, makes a very fair point. There is an old adage that no Parliament should bind its successor. Similarly, no Assembly should bind its successor. I do not know, but perhaps the SDLP had no ambitions to win the election. Perhaps it was quite happy and content —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: No, I will not give way. I have lost enough time.

Perhaps the SDLP had no ambitions to win the election and have a greater influence on the Programme for Government than it had on the previous Programme for Government. It is only right and proper, not least because of the many fundamental changes that there have been, that it was delayed until after an election and that the House and the people of this country were not dictated to about what the Programme for Government for the next four years should be.

As others have said, the question has to be "What will actually fundamentally change between the previous Programme for Government and the one that we are about to produce, notwithstanding the changes that there have been?". Mr Bradley, in moving the motion, talked about the imbalance in the economy and the need to prioritise jobs. Those priorities were

front and centre in the previous Programme for Government, and they will be front and centre in the next Programme for Government. Government may continue to propose different ways in which to tackle those issues. It is not as if Departments are not doing anything. Departments are addressing those issues and a host of others as we speak. Indeed, other issues, such as a crystallisation of the corporation tax question, may arise over the consultation period and have an effect on the Programme for Government that they would not have had six or nine months ago.

What annoys me most about the SDLP's motion, even though I agree with its sentiments, is that, even if we were to produce a Programme for Government today and set it down in front of you, you would probably still disagree with it. You would probably still vote against it. That is what you did before.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that all remarks should be made through the Chair.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Bradley cited the Cultúrlann centre — excuse my pronunciation — as a great example of the previous Programme for Government delivering, yet he and his colleagues all voted against that Programme for Government. Of course, his current leader did not vote against it — she trotted through the Aye Lobby in support of it with the rest of us — but the rest of the Member's party voted against it.

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

Mr Hamilton: You cannot have it both ways. Work is ongoing. I look forward to the draft document coming to the House. Now that such enthusiasm has been shown for —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Hamilton: — a new Programme for Government, I hope that everyone will endorse it.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. It is entirely correct that a Programme for Government that will underpin spending plans should be brought forward. I agree that, in the normal cycle of government, good practice is that that should happen in advance of a Budget. However, over the past year or 18 months, we have not had a normal cycle of government. The election in Britain produced the current Government, who, as

others remarked, slashed the Budget available to the Assembly. We have also been through an election here, which took up some of the six-month period that Mr Bradley referred to. It was probably late last year or early this year when we began to get a sense of the full implications of the British Government's approach to our finances, which allowed us to begin to plan our Budget process. Allied to that was the raid on our EYF stock by the Treasury.

The previous Executive's priority was to get a Budget together using their reduced resources, while keeping a full sense of that reduction, so that they could try to protect jobs, protect the vulnerable and protect front line services. I think that that was the correct approach. It was also correct to try to identify revenue-raising opportunities across the Executive to support those priorities.

At that time, while we were struggling, other parties that now look for a Programme for Government issued calls to get on with setting the Budget. The party proposing the motion predicted that we would come up with a one-year Budget to get us through an election. However, the Executive knuckled down to the work and came up with a four-year Budget. As my colleague said, they also came up with additional ideas for raising revenue to address our priorities of trying to offset the worst effects of the cuts imposed by Westminster. The Assembly election showed clearly that the electorate endorsed that approach from the parties leading the Executive.

Work and consultation has been ongoing on the new Programme for Government. I understand that a range of stakeholders has been consulted. The Executive subcommittee on the economy has yet to complete its work, which is key to the Programme for Government. The Budget review group's ongoing process of work will also contribute to the Programme for Government debate. I want a Programme for Government that is relevant to the current circumstances and challenges and ambitious in its big ideas for economic growth and tries to give some certainty and confidence to the Executive and Assembly's priorities over the coming years, even in very uncertain times.

We have a number of choices. We could produce a motherhood-and-apple-pie Programme for Government that tries to satisfy everybody and does not produce very much. We could gather

up all the targets across the Departments, set the red, amber and green standard against them and cut and paste them into a Programme for Government. Alternatively, we could try to get a strategic and focused Programme for Government that continues to prioritise growing the economy; improving educational attainment and skill levels; reducing inequalities and tackling fuel poverty; and expanding on the undoubted benefits of closer co-operation and harmonisation, North and South. Continued, focused work is required to get that right for people, and the Programme for Government must be different to that which we had previously so that it takes account of our circumstances.

I listened carefully to the remarks made by the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, who has gone now. I hope that they signal a new approach from all parties. Others commented on the difficulties involved in getting five parties to agree a Programme for Government. That can be difficult in any circumstances, but two of the parties have taken a kind of hokey-cokey approach to the Executive, with one foot in and one foot out. They have been in the Executive and in opposition at the same time. When the Executive were trying to deal with these difficult circumstances on an awayday last year, one Minister from the Ulster Unionist Party, who had the biggest spending Department in the Executive, turned up, sat shtum for the entire meeting and left without making a single contribution.

I hope that Mr Elliott's remarks herald a new approach and that all parties will pull together in delivering a Programme for Government and not sit with one foot in the Executive and one foot out. That argument clearly fell flat with the electorate in the Assembly election this year. We need to pull together and try to deliver something that is of benefit to people. We must not simply press for things or vote for the Budget in the Executive and against it when it comes to the Assembly. We must genuinely co-operate and have a genuinely cohesive approach, as Mr Elliott was arguing —

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

Mr Murphy: We need to get full support for a Programme for Government that puts the electorate first and addresses the serious issues that we face.

11.15 am

Mr Spratt: The Programme for Government lies at the heart of the work that we are doing in the Assembly. It is usual for a Government to set their programme and then to base their Budget on that programme. However, that was not possible the last time around, and some reasons for that have just been given. It was not possible because Departments and arm's-length bodies needed to have their budget in place to continue with their work. We all know why that happened: it was because of the shenanigans and politicking going on among some parties in the Executive. Given what the Chair of the OFMDFM Committee said, I hope that there is a change of view on that and that everyone in the Executive will work collectively and carry their responsibilities.

We need a Programme for Government in order to set targets and measure progress in attaining those targets. There were five key priorities in the Programme for Government for 2008-2011. When OFMDFM received a report on 23 June 2010, the results were mixed. However, the fourth priority, which was to invest in building infrastructure, received a score of 73%. As Chair of the Regional Development Committee, I am pleased that the Programme for Government's fourth priority received such a high score.

Like all other Departments, DRD will contribute significantly to the Programme for Government in a number of ways in the future. For example, the Department will promote sustainable transport programmes and will seek to increase employment by undertaking significant capital roads programmes. Improved infrastructure will boost the economy by making it easier and more comfortable for tourists to visit many of the great attractions that we have in Northern Ireland.

The Department is committed to improving people's health by investing in cycle routes and encouraging people to cycle and walk instead of using the car. That will have a significant effect in helping the environment by lowering CO2 emissions. Investment in a high-quality public transport system that services all the main arterial routes would also reduce the number of cars using the roads, thus easing congestion, and speed up travelling times for many people. That will have a positive effect on the economy.

All the issues that I have highlighted should and, I hope, will be included in the Programme for Government. It is important that that

programme comes about as quickly as possible and that Committees have time to discuss the budgets that have been allocated, to discuss and set the essential targets and to ensure that those will be monitored in a meaningful way.

In these difficult financial times, it is vital to ensure value for money for the taxpayer, as every penny must be spent appropriately. There is certainly no room for waste in government at this time. There must be a detailed look at budgets in Committees and all the rest of it, and those need to be monitored regularly. I hope that the PFG will be agreed by the Executive collectively and that the Committees will work together to make sure that there is delivery on programmes and absolutely no waste in any of those programmes. We support the motion, and I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us that we will get a Programme for Government in the not-too-distant future.

Mr McCallister: I support the motion. It is vital that we get a Programme for Government, and the parties have unanimously agreed that we should have one. The debate seems to be more about how quickly we can do that. I note that Mr Hamilton used the old adage about not binding your successor, yet, in March, we set a Budget that was obviously intended to continue into this session.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Let me finish the point. I would use another old adage: if you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there. The problem is about where the Executive are going now.

Mr Hamilton: The Member is citing the motto of the modern Ulster Unionist Party. Does he not accept, however, that a Budget is different from a Programme for Government? Departments and their agencies and the people of Northern Ireland cannot live without a Budget, but we can live without a Programme for Government. *[Interruption.]* It does not have to happen in the same way. Is it the position of the Member and his party that we did not need a Budget in place in order to fund the services that are delivered by Departments?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: My point, to which the Member did not bother to reply, was that we have bound

the successor Assembly. He says that we do not need a Programme for Government, but his colleague Mr Spratt has just said that we do. Mr Humphrey said that ideally we would have one. There is some division on the DUP Benches on whether we should progress with a Programme for Government. Clearly, that party is not too worried about whether we get one this month, next month or next year.

We will have no direction in this Government without a Programme for Government. It goes deeper than that, to the way in which Ministers function in government. Ministers flout the ministerial code and make solo runs because we have no Programme for Government with which to bind them. That is why, before the election, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, Tom Elliott, set out the party's position that we should agree a Programme for Government after the election.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: I just want to make this point. My party's position was that we should agree a Programme for Government after the election so that the Government would have a drive and a focus and know where they were going.

Mr Humphrey: It is unfortunate that the Member seeks to create division on these issues, when collective and collegiate responsibility is what should be coming forward from a Government in which his party sits. We are not going to take lectures from his party about the conduct of Ministers when its two Ministers defied the code of conduct and voted against the Budget.

Mr McCallister: Yes, and I am glad that they did. We argued against the Budget. I can safely say that, if we looked into the ministerial voting record, we could find examples of breaches of the ministerial code by just about everyone who has held ministerial office. That statement shows that the DUP has one set of rules for itself and its friends in Sinn Féin and another for the rest of us.

The real reason for the current situation is not that we have a five-party coalition. The real blockage is between the DUP and Sinn Féin, who cannot agree on the big issues. We have had no progress on education, on whether we are to have an 11-plus or move away from that. We have had no agreement on the Education and Skills Authority, although some sort of fudge may be cooking on that issue. We have no

agreement on a shared future; Mr Lyttle made a point about the cost of division. There is no agreement between the two largest parties in the Executive on any of the big issues. That is where the blockages are in this Government. We cannot get a Programme for Government because they cannot agree on those issues.

Last week, I attended an event at which junior Minister Anderson spoke about health and about improving children's lives. We have strategies for reducing child poverty and fuel poverty, but we have no way of achieving those aims. We had two debates yesterday, the first of which was about fuel poverty and how to implement cross-cutting measures to deal with that issue. We had a debate about the Police Ombudsman, but the real debate was about the fact that we do not have the structures to deal with that matter. We have had neither sight nor sign of how we might get agreement to deal with that. We have no agreement on how to deal with the past; on how to build a shared future; on housing; on how to get Departments out of their silos; or on cross-cutting issues such as a suicide strategy, child poverty, health and education working together on special educational needs to determine who delivers what and who, between the Health Department and DSD, delivers supported living. We have no agreement on any of those issues, which is to the shame of the House and, in particular, the lead parties in government. OFMDFM took the lead in setting the agenda, yet, six months after the Budget, there is still no sign of a Programme for Government, which everyone here agrees we need. What is to be in it is up for discussion, which is why we pushed so hard for talks after the election.

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

Mr McCallister: A Programme for Government would give the Executive direction and a focus. What is the purpose of having a Government unless you have a direction in which to use the power that people have elected you to use?

Mr Eastwood: I am not long a Member, and I could very well be accused of lacking lengthy legislative, never mind governmental, experience. Perhaps longer-serving Members, particularly those from the dominant parties in the Executive, will therefore enlighten me if I am wrong in assuming certain things about an Administration who deem themselves

responsible and credible. The need for a Programme for Government, moulded to incorporate a budgetary framework, is one such assumption that I hold, a programme that clearly articulates the spending and legislative priorities of the sitting Administration, providing certainty and hope to the economy and the people. It is worth noting that, after recent elections, such programmes were compiled speedily by the Scottish Administration and the Dublin Government. Yet, as of now, in the midst of a financial crisis that has engulfed this island and Europe, the Assembly, under the leadership of the DUP and Sinn Féin, has failed to produce that vital piece of governmental architecture.

It is not as if our people can afford such negligence and inaction. Cuts to public spending of £4 billion have been on the horizon for a considerable period. Unemployment, especially among our young, is increasing, and our private sector has not been provided with a stimulus to negate the austerity that successive Budgets will inevitably inflict. Economic forecasts, as analysed by PWC, describe the Northern economy's prospects as, at best, lacklustre, with growth in GNP unlikely to reach 1%. That growth forecast was calculated before the most recent worsening of the European debt crisis. It is clear, therefore, that effective and efficient government has never been needed so badly. Sadly, though, the Executive have failed to live up to the challenge at hand. Ultimately, if the Assembly does not use fully the powers at its disposal, we should not be allowed to complain about the lack of economic levers, and it would be a missed opportunity to produce lasting political priorities in public administration.

In my constituency of Derry, the lack of such clarity has led to delays and uncertainty around key economic and social programmes. Derry was promised a significant expansion of student numbers at the Magee campus, investment in our roads infrastructure and improvements to our dilapidated railway line. Those promises were subsequently punctuated with the proviso of "not yet".

A comprehensive Programme for Government would go some way to removing what, at times, can be cynical political posturing in favour of firm governmental commitments. Even at this late stage, there is still time for the Executive to draft a Programme for Government that would instil creativity in the manner in which

we provide public services and breathe life and growth into small and medium-sized businesses.

These institutions are a remarkable achievement, and I have no doubt that almost all Members have contributed in various ways to that achievement. If, however, our ambition fails to see beyond that achievement and provide a mature discourse on the delivery of government, the promise of those institutions will become hollow. Providing a progressive Programme for Government would mark a small beginning to ensuring that such stagnation is prevented from taking root.

Mr T Clarke: I have sat and listened for some time, and nobody could disagree with the sentiments expressed in the motion: everybody wants to see a Programme for Government that delivers for Northern Ireland.

It is quite ironic that the proposers of the motion are from the SDLP. We heard various speeches yesterday from the candidates who are running for the leadership of the party. I heard a discussion on the radio about the qualifications of the former deputy First Minister and his inability to speak the Irish language. We have had a contribution today from Dominic Bradley: perhaps he is going to put his name forward for the Irish presidency also.

11.30 am

I listened to my colleagues on the Benches to my right. They talked about the five-party coalition and the problems between Sinn Féin and the DUP. In the past, we had a Government here who were formed between the SDLP and the Ulster Unionists. Maybe things seemed to flow easier, but that was because the Ulster Unionists conceded everything that the SDLP wanted. The difference now is that there is a party in power that holds its position and holds other parties to account. We are taking lectures from about three brands of Ulster Unionist all sitting on the one Bench at the same time. They ask for a cohesive approach to a Programme for Government; perhaps they are in the position that they are today because they are not very cohesive in their approach.

We sat here for a time before the summer recess and shortly after the election, and we have now been back for a short time. There were changes in the Administration team after the election. People's priorities have changed, and we see that no better than in relation to

some of the priorities of the Ulster Unionist Party when it held the Health Ministry. There was a can't-do attitude, but we now have someone in that position with a can-do attitude. As times and positions change, priorities also change. Now we are in a position in which we have settled down after the election and Ministers have settled into their new positions.

Mr D Bradley: Is the Member going to say anything about the Programme for Government?
[Laughter.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr T Clarke: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker —

Mr B McCrea: Speak up.

Mr T Clarke: Sorry, there is a mouth to the right.

Mr B McCrea: I will take the intervention. We have heard an awful lot of waffle from the man to my left, but he has not said what he is going to do. He said that everybody else has done it wrong and everybody else cannot do anything, but let us hear what he has to say. Let us hear something positive from his party for a change.

Mr T Clarke: Basil has done very well in polls that have been conducted about speaking in the House. They have never created one for waffle, but I know that, if there were one for waffle today, he would undoubtedly win the prize. I will not take lectures from —

Mr McCallister: What about the Programme for Government?

Mr T Clarke: If you were listening —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks through the Chair, please.

Mr T Clarke: Although some parties find it easy to dish out criticisms, they find it difficult to accept criticisms that are levelled at them. There are two forms of the Ulster Unionist Party sitting, with one on the Front Bench and one on the Back Bench, so, as I said, we have different brands of Ulster Unionist trying to give us different messages. If Basil has a problem listening, he should have listened to what I said at the outset: no one should have a problem with accepting the thrust of the motion. It is just a wee bit ironic from the people who proposed it. There is work going on in the background, which I commend. Obviously, any right-thinking person would wish that to come forward as soon as possible so

that we can get on with the work at hand. Given that there has been a change in ministerial positions, priorities change. We have come through a period of recession, and the priorities have changed also. I welcome the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: I gladly welcome the motion before the House today. Although some Members have questioned the delay in bringing forward the Programme for Government from the Executive table, rightly or wrongly, now is not the time to point fingers or assign blame. Instead, we need to look forward. I believe that our constituents want us to look forward at how we are to achieve a more realistic, sustainable and necessary Programme for Government.

It was December of last year when the Finance Minister first brought forward the Executive's draft Budget for 2011-15, which proposed departmental spending allocations for the next four years. In the nine months that have since passed, constituents throughout Northern Ireland have encountered further changes and increased challenges due to pressures from the current economic climate. Those challenges serve to highlight the need for, and subsequently to shape, any renewed Programme for Government.

In May of this year, the consumer price index reached 4.5%, dealing a critical blow to the incomes of the population. Local households have also seen the biggest fall in disposable income for more than 30 years, and such falling incomes are a genuine obstacle to economic recovery. Furthermore, it is anticipated that, this year and next year, recovery in Northern Ireland will be much slower than the UK average. The situation in the housing sector also continues to decline, with property prices having fallen considerably over the past three years. In correlation with that, bank lending levels have also been restricted, a situation that seems unlikely to improve any time soon. Finally, although unemployment levels sit at 7.2%, that figure does not reflect adequately the unusually high rate of economically inactive individuals, which stands well above the UK average and is the highest rate across the UK regions.

Ideally, with the benefit of hindsight and capitalising on the previous six months' experience since the Budget was agreed, we should, arguably, be in a better position now to create an informed and reflective Programme for Government (PFG) to suit our predefined

budgetary commitments. In recent days, we have seen how restrictive and ruthless our departmental budgets can be. That has been evidenced by cuts to front line services in A&E departments.

In contrast, however, debates in the Chamber have served to highlight genuine opportunities for savings, efficiency and job creation. Only last week, Members made their voices heard on the topic of the green new deal and the need for cross-departmental working. Too often in Departments, actions and objectives are pursued in silos, and any new Programme for Government needs to consider seriously a more joined-up approach between the Departments where flexibility, co-operation and cohesive objectives can lead to a more realistic financial standing.

The pursuit of a shared future in Northern Ireland will also contribute further to efficiency savings. That will translate into shared services, shared housing, shared education and a more sustainable economy for generations to come. We need to end the duplication of services in our society.

As is evidenced by the debate, we all recognise the difficulties that this Administration is faced with at such a financially challenging time, but it is essential that we follow the example laid down by our counterparts in Scotland and Wales. They both secured agreements on their Budgets and PFGs, and they now find themselves in a position where their policy destination is planned and where they can choose the financial routes by which to get there. Ultimately, we can no longer afford to choose our route without first setting our destination, nor do we wish once again to become the poster child for putting the cart before the horse. I recognise the urgent need for an up-to-date Programme for Government, and the Alliance Party supports the motion.

Mr B McCrea: Thus far, some interesting points have been raised. Some Members have called for unity, five-party coalitions and working together but, in their speeches, have not been able to help themselves from getting stuck in and settling a few scores. I listened intently to Conor Murphy, and I noticed that he did not engage in that aspect, which is to his credit. However, he is trying to talk about a hokey-cokey type of government. It is not clear to me who is doing the hokey-cokey. Was he talking

about Sinn Féin and the DUP, or someone else? *[Interruption.]* I am not sure whether that was a comment from the party to my left.

Mr Weir: It is obvious even to a disinterested observer that if there is any reference to hokey-cokey, it is a reference to the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. On the one hand, those parties want to take their places in the Executive and, presumably, if any beneficial announcement is made, take credit for it. On the other hand, they want to be able to denounce the Executive willy-nilly, so they are half in and half out. That is the very definition of doing the hokey-cokey.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I was hoping to engage both sides of the House in the argument, but it is the party to my left that is disinterested. He talks to me about Ministers being in and out. I recall that there used to be a situation where the DUP took their Ministries but did not actually sit in the Executive. There is an interesting parallel here. Parties may take sideswipes, but I really want to know how the £4 billion of Tory cuts is somebody else's fault and why we cannot do anything else. Is the party to my left saying to the House that it wants the Government of this country to spend more money than they raise in taxes? Is that the profligate and squandering policy that it supports or does it want some form of proper fiscal attitude and a Government that try to deal with things? What exactly is the DUP position?

I was surprised that Mr Simon Hamilton, a man who normally comes across with a well-argued and well-articulated point of view, told the House that it does not matter whether we have a Programme for Government and that we can do without it. The reason why it does not matter, colleagues, is because the Programme for Government is done through a sordid back-room deal between the DUP and Sinn Féin. Of course, they can never agree until it gets close to an election because they then think, "Oh my goodness, we have done no legislation and agreed nothing." There has been no progress on a shared future, no resolution of education, no real attack on economic problems, no drive to reduce youth unemployment and no drive to sort out the travesty of teachers not getting jobs. There is absolutely nothing.

So when people try to lecture us about what we have not done, let me tell you clearly that we want to engage in proper debate. When people say things — as they have said before — I acknowledge that that is a positive contribution. However, parties say to us that we have to be part of a Government and have to be in a coalition but that we are not allowed to disagree with anything because they have decided what we will do — that is not how government works.

Mr Murphy: I appreciate the Member saying that his party — it made the point several times during the previous Executive — wants to be part of a genuine discussion. However, when we took ourselves out of these institutions and out of the normal run of Executive meetings to knock our heads together to come up with solutions to our difficulties, his colleague, who, at that time, had the biggest Executive budget of any Minister, came to a meeting, which was minuted and at which disagreement and all sorts of ideas and a genuine discussion were welcome on the table, with absolutely no contribution whatsoever. He did not speak a single word and left the meeting without giving any ideas, any disagreements and any solutions. He did so to the embarrassment of his party leader at the time, and I think that he continued privately to be an embarrassment to the rest of the party until it got rid of him after the election.

Mr B McCrea: I am at a disadvantage as I was not party to those discussions. However, if you treat people badly in the Executive or anywhere else, that will be their natural reaction.

I am pleased to hear the howling from the DUP because you know that you are winning when its Members start to yap. All they know how to do is personal invective. I was — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I was going to have a proper discussion on this but, unfortunately, all you get from the party to my left is howling and heckling. It has absolutely no contribution to make, and, you know what, this will find you out in the next three years because you have no ideas, no vision and no future. These people could not run a party to save their lives.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the presence of junior Minister Anderson for the debate, although, with no disrespect to her, it would have been courteous to the House had both the First Minister and the deputy First Minister

wherever they are today — been here to hear the contributions to the debate on the Programme for Government.

It is all very well bantering about, but more than 27,000 construction workers have lost their jobs over the past three years, and a number of small businesses that depended on them have closed down. Last week, some young people were left without a place at college, university or training and no prospect of employment. That is the reality in today's community.

11.45 am

Members spoke about the four-year Budget that was agreed but has, in the past couple of weeks, already been amended. For the record, I note a comment that was made on the Budget by PriceWaterhouseCoopers, which was:

“deeply concerned at the almost complete absence of economic and social targets and outcomes underpinning the draft Budget and Departmental plans for the period to 2014-15 and believe that the draft Budget and associated Departmental spending plans have more to do with ‘getting through the next four years’ than driving holistic policies intended to stimulate economic regeneration and social inclusion.”

That is a damning indictment of the previous Executive. Here we are, six months into a new Executive, and, face it, many of the people around that table are not strangers to each other, and we still have no Programme for Government. As other Members outlined, we have important decisions to make. We have decisions around cohesion, sharing and integration — a policy that went out for consultation last year, with 27 October 2010 the closing date for responses.

In recent weeks and years, we have had a number of documents dealing with the past. In fact, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) asked the Victims' Commission to come back with a document, which it did in June 2010. Yet, we are no further forward; nothing has been published and there is no strategy around all of that. We have a Rural White Paper, for which I am grateful to the then Minister, Michelle Gildernew, for publishing on 23 March. However, that Rural White Paper has cross-departmental objectives, so when will we see from the other Departments whether they will live up to the aspirations published in the Rural White Paper?

The Programme for Government that —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. She raised the issue of the Rural White Paper, which is not an area in which I have particular expertise. Does that not show one deficiency in any potential Programme for Government? She mentioned “high aspirations”, which will clearly be in any Programme for Government. However, the detail of that will need to be worked out between Departments, and, in particular, with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). Clearly, whatever is produced shortly as regards a Programme for Government will require a lot of detailed work at departmental level. So, although we agree that it is useful to have a Programme for Government, the detail to which we must drill down will always be below that contained in the Programme for Government anyway.

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

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I accept that, Mr Weir, but, nonetheless, is it not also the function of government to produce a Programme for Government that gives a high-level strategic vision, which other Departments subscribe to and work towards? Mr Weir is turning the methodology on its head. Members will know that the nature of the Executive and Departments demands cross-cutting strategies and joined-up government. That is not what we are getting. It is not what we have experienced over the past four years. Many commentators who have watched what went on here for the past four years will not forgive the Executive and the House if we do not start to deliver for the citizens we represent in what are very difficult and mean times for everyone in society.

Mr Campbell: I know that political lecturers and anoraks up and down the country regard the Programme for Government as a burning issue of the day. Night and day, they wonder what they will do at Stormont about the Programme for Government. They toil manfully and womanfully every day and every week, saying, “What are we going to do about the Programme for Government?” That is what they say — not.

In all seriousness, as my colleague from North Belfast said, it is important that a Programme for Government is worked out, because it is preferable, useful and people can identify with

it and see the progress that is made towards implementing it. However, if it is absolutely dyed-in-the-wool essential, I wonder how we managed to get by without any Programmes for Government during the 25 years of direct rule. In fact, those who are now lambasting the difficulties in getting a Programme for Government had a problem getting government to work for about four or five years, never mind a Programme for Government. However, we will set that aside.

Mr Nesbitt: Is the Member speaking in favour of direct rule?

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

Mr Campbell: Sometimes, I despair. If I had been in favour of direct rule, I would not have voted for the system that we have now. I did. With all its faults, it is better than direct rule. The point I was making was that, in all of the years of direct rule, there was neither the need, the desire nor the demand for Programmes for Government, and they got by. It was not great and it was not ideal. What we now have is better, but they got by, thus proving that you do not absolutely have to have a Programme for Government to get government working. That is the point.

I think it was Mr McCallister, when talking about the difficulty that the DUP and Sinn Féin had in getting a Programme for Government, who used the phrase "their friends in Sinn Féin", and I have heard the honourable Member for Lagan Valley talk about our "bedfellows" in Sinn Féin. I have heard that mentioned on a couple of occasions by Ulster Unionists, and it keeps coming up. There must be some clarity. Those critics who lambaste us either say that we are friends and bedfellows with Sinn Féin or that we cannot get agreement with them, but it cannot be both. I am afraid that people will have to come to some sort of outcome on those criticisms.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: As long as it is a short intervention.

Mr B McCrea: It will be short. The Member has said that it cannot be both. Either they are bedfellows or they cannot get agreement. Which is it?

Mr Campbell: At least it was short, which is a first. The issue is very simple.

Mr B McCrea: Are you going to answer?

Mr Campbell: Yes, and if I get an opportunity, I will. The answer is very straightforward. We have a system of government here that people voted for. We are in there, but we are not bedfellows with people we do not particularly like. However, it is the system that we have, and the constructive criticism that we offer every week of every month of every year will continue. Hopefully, that answers the question. I will try to get on to the substance of the matter before somebody complains about not getting into the Programme for Government.

The last Programme for Government had at its very heart the economy. Whether that was regarded as prescient or whatever, I hope that people will say that that should again be at the centre of the Programme for Government. People are not talking about whether we have a Programme for Government; they are talking about getting jobs, better paid jobs, improving the economy, improving our health service and improving our education service. That is what people are talking about, rather than the absolute paramount need to get a Programme for Government. Hopefully, we will get that done and dusted fairly quickly.

We will be able to see the progress that needs to be made on our transportation infrastructure, including railways. I think that the honourable Member for Foyle forgot which constituency he represents: he was talking about Edenderry, Ballinderry or Londonderry. However, I remind him that it is Foyle. He talked about the railway system. We do have to try to upgrade the railway system, particularly between Coleraine and Londonderry, and we have to get the £75 million required to do that. There is no point in just demanding that it be done; we must get the money to do it. Those issues need to be resolved and progress needs to be made, and I am sure that it will. We will continue to make that progress in this House whether people like to criticise or lambaste us, and whether they are in or out, or they cannot make up their mind whether they are both in and out and shaking it all about. However, we will continue to make that progress, hopefully for the greater good of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Nesbitt: We in these islands are in a unique situation: we have coalition Governments in

London, Dublin and Belfast. Of course, there is one significant difference: in London, despite the fact that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats did not realise going into the election that they would end up in a coalition, they came up with a Programme for Government within a week; and, in Dublin, Fine Gael and the Irish Labour Party produced a 64-page document representing their Programme for Government within six days. However, six months on, we have still to produce a document.

Mr Hamilton: The Member cites the UK coalition's agreement and Programme for Government. They produced what would have been his Programme for Government had he been elected — had the people of Strangford not seen sense. Will he enlighten the House as to what progress has been made by that Government on the likes of health reform and justice reform, which were included in that Programme for Government? Those reforms have been stuck in the sidings for some time, because the Government rushed to an agreement just to get it out, but they did not have anything to back it up with.

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

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for Strangford for his intervention. I was about to say that cracks have appeared not only in the coalition programme in London, but in Dublin. Your colleague, or, may I say, your boss the Finance Minister, Sammy Wilson, is very fond of the Latin phrase "ceteris paribus", which means other things being equal. Of course, events impact on a Programme for Government. — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Nesbitt: Mr Hamilton pointed out that, over the course of the next four years, the devolution of corporation tax-varying powers could impact on the Programme for Government. He said that, despite the fact that, only yesterday, Mr Wilson said that he did not envisage corporation tax-varying powers arriving within the term of this Assembly. That is a slightly mixed message, which, perhaps, he might like to clarify later.

I thank the SDLP's Mr Bradley for bringing the debate to the House. As Mr Elliott said, when we discuss the Budget and Programme for Government, it seems to be a question of the cart and the horse. Mrs Kelly mentioned the

absence from the Chamber of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I do not know where they are, but I hope that they are not appearing in front of the 'Dragons' Den' panel on BBC television. If they are, it would be like going in and saying to Deborah Meaden, Duncan Bannatyne and the rest, "Look here, I have a big lump of money. Have you any ideas about what we should do with it?"

The purpose of devolved government is to put the economy first. That was in the previous Programme for Government, and we expect it to be in the next. That applies to the public sector, the private sector and the social economy, but surely it works for those sectors only when we have government that allows access to the decision-makers who give fast and flexible responses to demands. In that regard, I point you to the short-term employment scheme, which has a budget of £19 million. It was introduced last April to try to address the unemployment problem, particularly amongst young people. Six months on, how many jobs have been created under that £19 million scheme? The answer is not one.

I approve of a Programme for Government; I think that it is essential, not merely desirable, as the DUP seems to think. However, it is not necessarily always a good idea. I refer to my time as a user of the Programme for Government, as one of the commissioners for victims and survivors. That body was set up by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which was, of course, our sponsor Department. However, other Departments, particularly the Health Department, the Department for Social Development and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development could have done good work for victims. It was our experience that, if we went to one of those Departments with what we thought was a good idea, it was not assessed on whether it was intrinsically a good idea but according to the extent to which it helped that Department achieve its public service agreements. We can, therefore, tie ourselves in knots with a Programme for Government that is too complicated and does not allow for the fast and flexible government that is the hallmark of good devolution.

I very much approve of today's motion.

12.00 noon

Mr Elliott: We have all talked about the link between the Budget and the Programme for Government, and Mr Campbell has highlighted today and in the past the issue of the Coleraine to Londonderry rail line. We want that issue to be included in the Programme for Government, as was mentioned in a debate last week. The difficulty is that it is not in the Budget. There is no money for it in the Budget. Hence, one failure is that there is no linkage.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for that intervention, and I agree with him. We have a four-year Budget. Last week, we stripped out, I think, £40 million for school fees and over £8 million for on-street parking, which already amounts to two big changes. I put it to the House that the Budget will have to be revisited and that it would be better to form a Programme for Government first.

Mr Allister: On a point of order. Why is it in this debate that only those who are members of parties that support or are part of the Government have been called to speak? Why is there a strategy to suppress any voice from outside the Executive, given the fact that, under Standing Order 17, there is an obligation to have a balance of opinion —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should resume his seat. That is not a point of order.

Mr Allister: It is a point of order.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member not to challenge the Speaker's decision.

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Go raibh míle maith agat. I have listened with a lot of interest to the comments. I agree that, in a perfect world, a Programme for Government would be in place prior to the determination of the final Budget position. Without doubt, I think that we all share that position. Early planning is good, and we all agree with that, but effective planning is better. We do not need a rapidly produced Programme for Government, but we do need the right Programme for Government. That point was made, particularly by Daithí McKay.

Earlier this year, when the Minister of Finance and Personnel presented the Budget to the Assembly, much was made of the length and timing of the process. William Humphrey and

Conor Murphy referred to that. It was suggested that it would be engineered along party political lines. What was the result? The result was a balanced Budget that had the interests of the people at heart. That was against the backdrop of this Executive and the previous Executive facing a £4 billion cut and, as Conor Murphy said, the raid on end-year flexibility. Despite that, the Budget review group and others identified £1.5 billion of additional revenue.

Of course we need to be aware of the importance of having a Programme for Government in place. There is, however, a greater imperative to have a Programme for Government in place that is founded on certainty and characterised by a set of priorities that are relevant and commitments that are ambitious and capable of delivering real change and substantive benefits.

In finalising our expenditure priorities and allocating our available resources to those, we undoubtedly now have a solid footing on which we can produce a new Programme for Government, a footing that certainly did not exist and could not have existed until the completion of the election in May 2011. William Humphrey, Simon Hamilton and Trevor Clarke all agreed with that.

At this point, I am keen to stress to Members that our office has been working steadily, despite some of the comments made in the Chamber that nothing is being done and that perhaps that contributed to the beginning of a process. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our officials have been working steadily behind the scenes since before the dissolution of the previous Assembly, listening to the views and opinions of a wide range of stakeholders and representative bodies and taking early soundings of the issues that matter most. In turn, those discussions have helped us to inform our thinking on how priorities are articulated and on the means by which the document — and, by that, I mean the delivery programme — may be best structured to effect change and bring about the process that we want to achieve. That was articulated by Conor Murphy.

Officials from OFMDFM have been engaging proactively with a number of stakeholders. They have had meetings with a wide range of individuals and organisations to discuss their ideas and suggestions for the next Programme

for Government. Of course, it is very important to engage with stakeholders, but it was even more important when, in the last Executive, at least one Minister would not contribute to the discussions. The discussions that our officials have had have helped us to identify a key series of challenges over the next four years, such as, for example, the need to ensure alignment with DETI's economic strategy, alignment with the requirement to improve education attainment — and a number of Members have referred to that — and the need to look at skills escalation, reduce inequalities and address issues such as fuel poverty.

Such pre-consultation meetings have helped to highlight the need for real transformational change that is now offered by a new Programme for Government despite the economic challenges facing the North. The meetings highlight the need for a dialogue with individuals, external organisations and stakeholder groups as part of the process of preparing the new Programme for Government. There is a need for constructive dialogue with intermediary bodies and umbrella groups, which, as part of the process of preparing the Programme for Government and as the preparation unfolds, helps to inform the thinking and the underlying strategy.

Running parallel to that work, OFMDFM officials have helped to ensure that there will be complementarity between the Programme for Government and the headline goals contained in Europe 2020. That was mentioned by a number of Members, and, in particular, by the Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It was also mentioned by Ministers during discussions. That has helped to highlight the need for the North to raise its employment rate and levels of investment in R&D, address the issue of climate change and the promotion of energy efficiency and renewables, raise education levels and promote social inclusion through reducing poverty. Most of those items were mentioned by one Member or another with respect to the kind of Programme for Government that we need to bring forward.

Without doubt, current economic circumstances make equality considerations more relevant than ever. In full recognition of that, and conscious of our obligations under section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, OFMDFM officials, in parallel with the work on preparing a

new Programme for Government, have informed and undertaken, at strategic level, an equality impact assessment on the draft programme. That will be further informed by the outcome of the Programme for Government consultation. Officials from across OFMDFM's Programme for Government sustainability and equality units have all been involved in drafting the Programme for Government to date. Of course, officials from other Departments are also involved in the process, so cross-cutting work is taking place, despite what some Members have said.

We need a Programme for Government and — as Dolores Kelly and others have said — it needs to be meaningful. We need one that has at its core the key reforms necessary to create real and meaningful change based on the needs of children, older people, communities that live in deprivation and people who are marginalised and face the challenge of the current recession every day. However, true reforms are not put in place overnight. They need to be researched, developed, discussed and debated, agreed, implemented and then monitored.

I take this opportunity to highlight to Members the value of debate. Only last week, Members tabled a motion, which was almost unanimously supported, that sought to recognise the importance of the green economy in the new Programme for Government. As a Minister in the office of the centre, I had the privilege of responding to that debate, too. Since then, I have asked officials from our office to consider the content of the debate in the context of the draft Programme for Government and to examine ways in which that may be appropriately expressed.

The drafting phase of the work is almost concluded, and we intend to share the draft Programme for Government with our Executive colleagues and to brief the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as Tom Elliott, its Chairperson, asked, with a view to ensuring that the details that we have before us are discussed. We will take all comments and recommendations on board in order to produce a very effective and robust Programme for Government. We will do that as soon as we are in a position to.

Mention was made of the investment strategy and its vital relationship with the Programme for Government. Jimmy Spratt, Dominic Bradley and a number of others remarked on that. As

Members will know, the previous Executive spent more on capital investment year on year compared with spend in the years of direct rule. For instance, during 2007-08, £1.4 billion was spent on gross capital investment; in 2008-09, £1.7 billion was spent; and a further £1.7 billion was spent in 2009-2010.

Members will be aware that the investment strategy is under review. Some Members called for that to happen, but they should have known in the first place that it is already happening. It is happening, albeit for the period beyond 2015. However, the Executive must consider the new Programme for Government against a range of options for the next steps of our investment programme, given that many potential projects are to be considered, and there are considerable lead-in times. All of that will have to be taken into account. We will initiate all that during the Programme for Government period. Officials from OFMDFM are liaising with colleagues in the Strategic Investment Board to consider the connectivity of those documents. Once again, that demonstrates that joined-up work is taking place. Without doubt, any suggestion made in the Chamber, by any Member, that Departments are working in silos could not be further from the truth. Joined-up, collaborative work is going on, and we, as new members of the Executive, are encouraging that across Departments.

During the debate, much mention was made of the financial environment within which we are expected to operate over the coming months and years. Dominic Bradley, Daithí McKay, Colum Eastwood and others referred to that. What is critical is how the Programme for Government is delivered in the current challenging climate. It is a challenging climate that we all recognise. Given the financial and resource constraints that we all face, we are now more determined than ever to consider the new Programme for Government, and we will ensure that all of this will encourage and enable connectivity and cohesiveness across all areas of government. Again, that will address the view that has emerged from some Members that there is no connectivity across Departments.

We will do that to ensure that we deliver on our objectives. We expect, demand and will make sure that Departments work together more closely than ever to tackle the strategic and cross-cutting issues that they must address. We also expect Departments to form mutually

beneficial working arrangements with partner organisations that go beyond traditional demarcation lines, and we will be vigorous in our efforts to ensure that that occurs.

12.15 pm

We intend that the focus of the Programme for Government will be strategic and will evolve from the first Programme for Government, which took a more strategic approach through the use of public service agreements supported by a vast swathe of targets and actions. Although that served its purpose, we are seeking to reduce the bureaucracy associated with the previous Programme for Government, in line with our previously stated intention to deliver high-quality and efficient public services. We intend to make it more meaningful, with officials testing delivery, and, at the same time, Ministers driving that delivery.

That will enhance accountability, and I encourage the party that brought forward the motion to ensure that its Minister attends accountability meetings, because that was not the experience in the previous Executive and it needs to be addressed. I am asking, in a very encouraging way, the parties, particularly the party that tabled the motion, to ensure that whatever Minister they have in office in the time ahead attends the accountability meetings, because accountability and transparency are very important.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: I will give way at the end if I have time. The approach that we will take to handling the key objectives will be to make sure that things are more preventative, and, where required, we will make positive interventions to make sure that we have outcomes. We fully intend to support the new Programme for Government with strong accountability and reporting mechanisms that constantly test delivery against targets and to put in place formal arrangements for early interventions and prevention measures to remedy underperformance. That is something that every Member is looking for. We should not tolerate underperformance when we can make a difference and when an intervention can bring about change that will demonstrate to people that outcomes are delivering for those who matter the most: the people out there who want an effective, robust Programme for Government.

I remind everyone in the House that, as Gregory Campbell said, any Programme for Government is ultimately about one thing: the people. The vision that we have for a new Programme for Government is to support growth, and we need to do so economically, intellectually and socially, as Conor Murphy said, for everyone, both now and in the future.

That is why, when we consider the decisions and actions that we have seen from the Executive and Members over the course of the previous Assembly, it is important that we take account of the additional resources that we were able to put in place when we agreed the Budget before the election period.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Ms M Anderson: I will give way if I have time, and I believe that I will have time. I want to put this in context. We were being encouraged to try to rush through a Budget, but it was right that we did not do so, and it was right that we found additional revenue of £1.5 billion. Let us look at what we were able to do.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms M Anderson: We were able to provide additional resources in the region of £190 million for Health, £154 million for Education, £51 million for Employment and Learning, and £107 million for Regional Development, and, on top of that, a decision was taken at the first Executive meeting of the new session to freeze university tuition fees. As Members will know, we have cross-party consensus on how to address corporation tax; whatever about how long it will take and the discussion about that, we know that there is consensus to address it. Therefore, it is clear to all who are willing to listen and to see that the Executive are preparing to invest in our biggest asset: our people.

The return on our investment must be sustainable economic growth. That will come through raising education standards, which is a need that many Members referred to; upskilling our workforce, which, again, there is collective agreement about; and increasing our attractiveness to global investors and further enhancing our reputation of innovation and excellence in research and development.

I thank the Members who brought forward the issue for debate. I will now give way to Dominic, since I told him that I would do so if I had time.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. She mentioned accountability. I think that junior Ministers also have to be accountable, and they have to be accountable for the accuracy of their statements. She mentioned the figure of £1.5 billion. However, the Minister of Finance and Personnel has told the House on several occasions that it has not been possible to include £1.5 billion in the Budget. In fact, only £600 million of that £1.5 billion has been realised, and I welcome that. However, as I said, we need to be accountable, and we need to be accountable for accuracy. So, I hope that the junior Minister will revise her figures.

Ms M Anderson: What I will say to you, Mr Bradley, is that, without doubt, £1.5 billion was identified. I did not say that it was allocated. Again, I do not know whether this is the dialogue of the deaf. If you listened to what I said, you would know that £1.5 billion was identified and that £800 million of that was allocated.

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

Ms M Anderson: A Budget review group has been tasked with identifying additional resources. However, we all know the position you took on the Budget, Mr Bradley.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Ms M Anderson: So, I am glad to hear that you are actually supporting it now. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank everyone who has taken the time to come here today, regardless of whether their facts and figures are accurate. I appreciate that. I listened very intently to what the junior Minister said. She said — I think that this is the correct phraseology, but I am sure that she will correct me if it is not — that we do not need “a rapidly produced Programme for Government”. I have to say that the last thing that I would call this is a rapid process, but that is probably the best thing that you could say about it.

Throughout the debate, I heard more ideas and direction from Members of all parties about what should be inputted into this than the Minister provided us with. My colleague Dominic

Bradley — go raibh maith agat, a Dhominic, as ucht an rún a mholadh — referred to the need to maximise every benefit. My colleague referred to an extra 27,000 people from the construction industry, and my other colleague referred to the extra 29,000 people who are unemployed. We have to be extremely conscious of those figures. There are people who have to choose between heating and eating. That is a fact, as everyone in the House knows from speaking to people in their constituency offices. Whatever about the politics of it, ideas need to come forward, and we need to have a definite Programme for Government that benefits people.

My colleague referred to the issues of the economy, tourism and agrifood. I thought that the Minister, given her Department's brief, would have responded to Mr Elliott's thoughts about the Barroso report and to thoughts about research and development in the EU. Clearly, an emerging theme throughout the debate was the need to address not only skills acquisition but the fact that skills are being lost through redundancies, layoffs and unemployment across our society. That issue certainly needs to be addressed.

Aside from the bit of banter back and forth, Mr Humphrey talked about focusing on the economy, employment, and the requirement for joined-up government between all the parties, which is another theme that I will come to in a moment. Mr McKay referred to the need to protect the vulnerable against cuts. Mr Lyttle also touched on the issue of skills acquisition — indeed, I referred to the loss of skills — and he also mentioned the issues of older people and people in deprivation. He also referred to the green new deal, which is a key area that has come up in the debate.

Mr Hamilton said that we do not have Departments in silos. The same theme was repeated by junior Minister Anderson. Well, if we do not have Departments in silos, why do the likes of the all-party working group on construction and the construction industry tell us that the picture that they get is that Departments work in silos and do not work cross-departmentally in the community's interests? That may well be going on behind closed doors by a few civil servants who are huddled in a room somewhere. However, the message is certainly not getting out to society or, indeed, to people who are being crippled economically at present. Therefore, a big job

needs to be done despite what the junior Minister says.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he accept that what people out there want at present is a kick-start to the local economy, particularly in construction? There is gross annoyance that capital projects are not being started. That is currently people's priority.

Mr McGlone: Indeed, I thank the Minister — I mean, the Member — for his intervention. You will forgive me for that wee Freudian slip, Joe.

Mr Humphrey: *[Interruption.]*

Mr McGlone: You picked up on it quickly, William. I thank Mr Byrne for his intervention. Yes; that is a huge issue. Members from other parties who attended that all-party working group are in the Chamber: Mr McElduff, for example. That issue is raised time and again by small businesses and by the construction industry and professionals associated with it. Decisions need to be got out the door pronto. Whatever money is available to spend on capital schemes must be spent now in order to support and sustain the industry. Much has been made of sustainability by the junior Minister. That is one practical example of how that could be done.

Conor Murphy referred to the requirement to protect jobs and the economy and to put the people first. Indeed, he referred to my party putting the people first. I would like to think that through its productive role in the Assembly and the Executive, it does exactly that.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I am sure that, like me, he watched last night's programme on John Hume and the formation of the SDLP. I am sure that he will agree that our party stands on a very proud history and record of putting the people first.

Mr McGlone: Yes, indeed. I thank the Member for reminding me of our party's proud history in Derry through John Hume. We did not make false promises about a rail link to Derry. We did not make false promises that the road network would be enhanced. Our political party did not stick up posters around the city making all of those promises. We deliver on our promises. Perhaps the problem was that a senior civil servant in the Department was drafting another letter that was a wee bit misleading.

Mr McElduff: I apologise to the Member for being unable to watch that programme because

I was watching 'The Frontline' on RTÉ, which profiled Martin McGuinness's chances of winning the Irish presidential election.

Mr McGlone: We could always argue the merits or demerits of both figures and their positive contribution to the city of Derry —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We must return to the subject of the debate.

Mr McGlone: We are getting slightly distracted. I take that point, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but some of your party colleagues added to the diversion.

Mr Spratt referred to the need to work together collectively and the need for investment in a quality public transport system. John McCallister referred to the lack of direction on the Programme for Government and to the fact that people were not agreed. I have to say that that is the message that comes from people outside the Building: that the Assembly must get its act together, work more collectively and present an image of working in the interests of the entire community.

Mr Allister: The Member makes some valid points. Indeed, throughout the debate, Members from his party and, indeed, the Ulster Unionists made valid criticisms of the absence of a Programme for Government and of how they are treated in the Executive. Is there not a certain compelling logic to the road down which they are headed, which is that they should grasp the nettle and become an opposition in the House? Some people think that one person can have an effect. How much more effect could a third of the House have in opposition? Would that not make for better government, rather than being part of a dysfunctional, failing Executive of which the absence of a Programme for Government is but a symptom?

12.30 pm

Mr McGlone: It is worthwhile having a discussion on that. I do not think I will be joining Mr Allister in his party of one just at the moment. We have quite a bit of work to do on the shared future before we arrive at that point.

Mr McCallister: See how the leadership goes. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McGlone: Maybe you will join us then, Jim? I thank him for his intervention.

A very valid point was made by Mr McCallister, who said that there is no structure or strategy on cross-cutting issues, which is a big issue. I am glad to hear, and I hope the Minister is starting to point up, that we are going to see Departments working on a cross-cutting basis. I hope that senior civil servants are huddled somewhere in rooms, irrespective of where those rooms are, and are beginning to get together instead of maintaining themselves in silos and protecting the interests of their Departments. This is about something much bigger than that: the interests of the community.

Mr Eastwood referred to the spending cuts and the requirements for Derry and for public transport and the rail network there. I highlighted commitments and promises that were made by previous incumbents of the relevant ministerial seat that simply have not been delivered.

Mr Trevor Clarke said that he had no problem with the sentiments of the motion but then went on to disagree considerably with some of the principles of the motion. But then, I know Trevor. *[Laughter.]*

I again thank Mrs Cochrane for her comments on obstacles to the cost of living and the economically inactive in society. Welfare reform will have a major effect on that, and many people are troubled and deeply concerned about that.

Basil McCrea referred to issues and delays in Departments. My colleague Dolores Kelly, as I pointed out, referred to the construction industry.

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

Mr McGlone: Molaim an rún agus gabhaim buíochas le achan duine as ucht a dtacaíochta. I thank everyone who spoke in support of the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that good practice in governance is to base a Budget on an up-to-date Programme for Government so that the policy initiatives can inform financial planning; notes that it is now over six months since the Assembly voted on the Executive's Budget 2011-15; further notes the significant economic change in this region since the 2008-2011 Programme for Government

was published; and calls on the Executive to publish for consultation a new draft Programme for Government which adequately addresses the economic challenges in the coming years.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I refer you to Standing Order 17(5), which states:

“The Speaker shall determine the order of speaking and the number of speakers in any debate having due regard to the balance of opinion on the matter”.

Will you consult the Speaker to see whether there is any way to enable all those who wish to take part in a debate in the House to do so? I realise that there are issues that you have to take into consideration and that a balance has to be struck, but perhaps you will bring that up.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am happy to do that.

The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: Order. We come to Question Time. First, we have questions to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Mr Allister, do you want to make a point of order?

Mr Allister: Yes, thank you, Mr Speaker. I understand that you will shortly advise the Assembly that question 3, which stands in my name, has been transferred to the Department of Finance and Personnel. Mr Speaker, I direct you to the content of question 3: it is Department-specific and relates precisely to OFMDFM, asking why that office thinks that it needs eight special advisers. Why, in those circumstances, is such a question being diverted to a different Department, particularly when one examines the rules and can find no authority for that? Indeed, I have taken the trouble of consulting the Business Office —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has made his point. That is not a matter for the Speaker; it concerns the two Departments. As Speaker, I have absolutely no role in how questions are transferred. As I said, that is a matter solely and absolutely for the Departments concerned, and we should now move into Question Time.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order —

Mr Speaker: No, I am not taking any further points of order. We really need to move on to Question Time.

Parades Commission

1. **Ms Ritchie** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their meeting with the Parades Commission on 28 June 2011. (AQO 339/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): As we advised the Sinn Féin Member for North Antrim on 19 July in a written response to his question, we discussed with the chairman and chief executive of the Parades Commission the then

upcoming marching season, and we expressed our shared hopes for a calm summer. We also reiterated our commitment to a new and improved framework for dealing with parades, as outlined in the Hillsborough Castle Agreement.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the First Minister for his answer. However, given the failure to resolve the parading issue post-Hillsborough, is it now parked? Will he also give an assurance that the existence and independence of the Parades Commission will be protected, maintained and enhanced?

Mr P Robinson: I regret that we have not yet been able to proceed with the parades legislation. We believe that it provides a much better structure and format for taking forward the issue of parades. Some Members went out of their way to dissuade others from supporting that. The Member for North Antrim is the poster boy of the Parades Commission. His thumbprint is on every bad decision that the Parades Commission takes, because he wants it to remain in place rather than having the alternative. However, the independence of the body itself is not a matter for the deputy First Minister and me. Its members are, of course, appointed by the Secretary of State.

Mr Storey: In many regards, the First Minister has answered the question that I wanted to pose to him. Does he agree that the Parades Commission has failed miserably, in places such as Rasharkin in my constituency and in other places such as Ardoyne and the Garvaghy Road, in its inability to find a fair and equitable way of resolution? That underlines the important issue of ensuring that —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Storey: — as soon as the Parades Commission can be decommissioned and put into storage and out of the way, the better for Northern Ireland and for parades.

Mr P Robinson: Central to the issue is that a parade must take place in a respectful manner and be respected by the whole community. If we are to make real advances, greater understanding and tolerance of those matters will be required. We started to look at what the alternatives might be because there was a widespread view in at least one section of the community that the Parades Commission had

become part of the problem rather than the solution.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the First Minister clarify whether the flags protocol group will meet in the coming months to discuss the issue of contentious flags during the parading season?

Mr P Robinson: We still have a monitoring process for the flags issue. The answer is yes, although we will probably want to encompass how we move forward on that issue under the CSI proposals. In 2005, a protocol was set down about the number of flags, where those flags are flown and the type of flags that are flown. That was revised in 2009, and we will want to look at it further. There have been issues relating to flags over the past number of months. There are sensitivities in this area, and we need to be very careful that we have respect for the community that has to pass through areas. We also have to ensure that flags involve no symbolism of paramilitary groups.

Mr Elliott: Given that republicans seem to want to oppose a number of parades continually, does the Minister accept that it is important that whatever process is put in place is much simpler for those applying to have a parade?

Mr P Robinson: It needs to be a much more open process than is the case at present. Groups are often left unaware of some of the reasons behind a decision. That was part of the thinking behind the new processes that the deputy First Minister and I recommended. Indeed, it allowed for the cross-examination of some of the evidence that might be supplied even by the police. It is not only a simplification but a much more open and fair process that is required.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration: Working Group

2. **Mr Newton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many times the cross-party working group on cohesion, sharing and integration has met. (AQO 340/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: As Members will know, in the days following the Assembly election, the five main political parties each agreed to appoint representatives to a cross-party working group to seek consensus on issues to enable the publication of a programme for cohesion,

sharing and integration. Officials informed me that the final party nominee was received only last week. That means that we are only now in a position to call a meeting of the working group, which makes the agreed timeline for the CSI strategy very challenging.

Consultation on the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration has been completed. We are considering the analyses of the many responses received, one prepared by an independent consultant and another by our own officials. Now that party nominations have been confirmed, we are seeking to convene a meeting at the earliest opportunity, which we expect to be next week.

Mr Newton: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Does he agree that, in order for a CSI strategy to be meaningful, transparent and successful, it is absolutely necessary that all parties agree to work constructively towards the successful outcome of agreeing and implementing the strategy?

Mr P Robinson: The Member is absolutely right. It seems contradictory to bring forward a strategy for cohesion, sharing and integration and then bicker about it in the Assembly. That is why the deputy First Minister and I responded very warmly to the suggestion by the other parties in the Executive that the party leaders would meet and discuss these matters and that we should set up a working group. It is the right *modus operandi* to bring the whole of the Executive and the Assembly along with this process.

Mr Byrne: Have the CSI proposals been considered in the North/South context? Given the 10 years of commemorations ahead, is it important that the CSI strategy includes some of the aspects that are shared right across the island?

Mr P Robinson: It has not been. This is obviously a strategy for Northern Ireland. We have built a very good relationship with the Irish Republic. We are always willing to learn lessons from other parts of the world. If there are lessons to be learned, we are happy to learn them. The Executive obviously have the final say on the strategy and will want to bring it to the Assembly for endorsement at some stage. Within the next very short while, perhaps a matter of a week, we expect not only to have provided the Committee with the documentation

that we promised it but to have put that into the public arena.

Mr McCallister: Will the First Minister confirm that it was not the Ulster Unionist Party that has held the process back? I was the nominee from our party at Stormont Castle on 13 May, and that was reconfirmed on 21 June in his office in this Building.

Mr P Robinson: I do not think it is helpful for us to get into a blame game around holding it back. Officials informed me that that they received the final nominee from parties only in the past few days. We want to move forward on a constructive basis. I do not think we will do that by trying to work out who was to blame through a process of elimination or inclusion.

Mr McLaughlin: Reference was made earlier to centenary commemorations. There is a decade of significant commemorations coming up: the signing of the covenant; the battle of the Boyne; and the 1916 rising. That presents a unique opportunity to examine —

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that supplementary questions can grow legs, but they should be brief.

Mr McLaughlin: Does the First Minister recognise the opportunity to advance the CSI strategy by examining our disputed or shared history?

Mr P Robinson: The deputy First Minister and I, along with the Acting deputy First Minister — or whatever the title ends up being — discussed commemorations just yesterday. We recognise that they are important and sensitive, and we want to ensure that they are held in a way that will not be divisive to our community. The Member is right that there is a list of commemorations, some more contentious than others. That list includes the centenary of the sinking of the Titanic.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been transferred, and question 11 will get a written response.

OFMDFM: Equality Scheme

4. **Ms Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will bring forward their Department's equality scheme.

(AQO 342/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I am pleased to say that OFMDFM's equality scheme will be issued for a three-month public consultation this week. The scheme has also been formally issued to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI). The scheme is our commitment to ensuring that promotion of equality of opportunity and good relations is at the heart of our policy-making. It follows closely the model scheme produced by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the direction given in the ECNI's document 'Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998: A Guide for Public Authorities'.

Alongside the equality scheme, we are publishing our audit of inequalities and an associated action plan, with which we hope to proactively tackle all areas of inequality. In line with the Equality Commission's guidance, the audit and action plan have shifted the emphasis of the scheme to doing active good rather than simply doing no harm. We look forward to engaging with all sections of our society on the scheme during our consultation.

Ms Gildernew: Go raibh míle maith agat. I welcome the answer and think the fact that we have moved towards active good will have more of an equality impact on our society. However, given that OFMDFM has the lead role and that many other Departments look to it for leadership in this, why did it take so long for the Department to issue its new equality scheme?

Mr Bell: I appreciate the words and the need to move towards looking at something that is proactively good as opposed to simply doing no harm. As I think the Member will understand, it is a complex matter, and this Department's strategic responsibility for working on both equality and good relations meant that we had to take care to ensure that the relationship between equality and good relations, namely between section 75(1) and section 75(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, has been reflected properly in the scheme. Moreover, as we are all aware, the Assembly recess period was a major factor contributing to the delay in publishing our Department's equality scheme.

2.15 pm

Mr Campbell: The junior Minister will be aware, as many others are, that some of the organisations that come under the aegis of the First Minister and deputy First Minister — for

example, the Equality Commission and other groups within the Civil Service — themselves have an imbalance. It is not a perception of an imbalance but an actual imbalance in the under-representation of the Protestant community. Can he ensure that the consultation process, when it is completed, will address that fundamental under-representation, which has existed for many years?

Mr Bell: The honourable Member makes his point very well. We are concerned. Equality has to be a two-way process. That applies equally when representatives of the Protestant community are disenfranchised or treated unequally in the process as it exists. The equality legislation exists to serve that two-way process. I encourage anybody in any organisation in the Protestant community and other communities who feels that there is under-representation and unfairness to take that through the equality legislation. It applies as much to them as to anybody else.

There are other issues. For example, one of the major concerns that I have is the educational under-representation and underachievement of working-class Protestant boys, who are the most vulnerable. That was emphasised in a recent report by Dr Peter Shirlow of Queen's University. It is working-class Protestant boys who are educationally underachieving. The follow-on is that they will not get the requisite education or build the required skill sets to achieve and play their full role in the professions. All areas and factors that contribute, not least the under-representation and underachievement of Protestant working-class boys, have to be factored into any consideration of equality.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the junior Minister for highlighting the underachievement of Protestant working-class boys. I believe that it has been an issue for around 10 years. Does the Minister have any sense of a cost/benefit analysis of his Department's work on equality and good relations?

Mr Bell: Yes, indeed, it has been around. I was working with my Strangford colleague's predecessor and others over the past number of years on that issue. Inequality is why we brought about the social protection fund and the social investment fund. Therefore, the groups and organisations that are experiencing difficulties, particularly in a time of recession, can access a

fund that will help by giving them not a handout but a hand up.

Mrs McKeivitt: In future, will full equality impact assessments be carried out on major Executive decisions? Such assessments failed to occur in the recent Budget process.

Mr Bell: I am not sure that the premise of the Member's statement is correct. When it is examined in the cold light of reality — I appreciate that the Member is a new Member and may not fully understand the process that was undertaken at the time — I do not think it will stand up to scrutiny.

Let me tell you of some of the issues regarding inequality to inform the Member better. We published an audit of inequalities and an action plan that was designed so that we could target where we could make a significant difference. It is not about point scoring; it is about making a significant difference to the lives of people. Our audit of inequalities is focused on high-level social and economic trends across Northern Ireland. In our action plan, we related those to specific policies and strategies that are being implemented or are about to be implemented to show what actions we are taking and what actions we will take to improve the outcomes for section 75 groups.

We have encompassed policies that deal with the duty to ensure equality of opportunity and the good relations duty. In conducting the audit and preparing our action plan, we followed a seven-step approach that identified and reviewed high-level economic and social trends and considered the long-term implications of those trends on growing inequalities. In considering OFMDFM's functions, we considered the potential of the Department to positively influence those trends in order to determine whether our activities can affect negative consequences. We agreed together how to measure the outcomes, but just because we cannot measure something totally does not mean that we cannot take action on it. It is about measuring changes in inequalities, identifying improved data collection, quantifying the scale of the inequality and offering a suggested timescale over which significant change may be expected to occur.

Programme for Government: Poverty

5. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what new measures to address poverty they intend to bring forward in the forthcoming Programme for Government.
(AQO 343/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: In developing our new Programme for Government, we are intent on continuing the work that we have completed to date in the challenge to eradicate poverty. We intend to pursue that on several fronts. The social investment fund, which was agreed in March 2011, is aimed at reducing poverty and unemployment. The social protection fund will operate as a means of tackling disadvantage and protecting the most vulnerable. Through those funds, £100 million has been secured, despite the financial constraints that were imposed as a result of the budgetary settlement for projects across the 2011-15 period.

The settlement allocated an additional £12 million towards the provision of support for the delivery of a new childcare strategy. We are also concerned about rising energy costs. It is our intention to develop proposals to alleviate hardship through use of the social protection fund. Almost 7,000 social and affordable homes were provided during the life of the previous Assembly. Around 15,000 homes benefited from the warm homes scheme, and over £48 million was provided through capital and revenue projects to support vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. Those activities made a lasting and fundamental difference to the lives of thousands of people.

We are committed to identifying the key challenges that keep individuals, families and communities in poverty and to tackling those directly through strategically targeted interventions that are designed to bring about tangible reductions and solutions. Those are among the key issues that we want to address. In drafting a new Programme for Government, our priorities are being developed in a way that will most effectively enable actions that will bring about long-term benefits to individuals and society alike.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the First Minister for his detailed response. However, given the increase in family and child poverty in all our constituencies, does he agree that we should set out a course and carry out a comprehensive

study of the effects of child poverty across Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: There is an Executive subgroup that is specifically charged with looking at those issues. I hope that all Ministers will take those meetings seriously and attend them and make a positive contribution. Departments will have individual responsibilities for various areas of work that impact on child poverty. It will be up to each Minister to determine the type of review or study that they will carry out for their area of responsibility.

Mr Spratt: Does the First Minister agree that the best way to address child and family poverty is to get parents back into work? Therefore, is it not important that providing new opportunities and growing the economy should remain the key priority for government?

Mr P Robinson: Yes, absolutely. When we talk about child poverty, we are really talking about the poverty of the parents. That, to a large extent, comes down to whether people have a worthwhile job at a fair and decent wage. The onus obviously falls on government to continue its work to grow the economy. That is what we have done, and it is why, in the previous Programme for Government, the growth of our economy was front and centre. I hope and expect that that will continue to be the case.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The First Minister has mentioned some measures to alleviate poverty. However, he has not mentioned the income disregard scheme. Can he give us an update on that scheme, as it was he and the deputy First Minister who originally brought it to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister?

Mr P Robinson: We will continue to consider a move forward with those issues. Of course, it is not just one issue; a series of factors have an impact on the child poverty figures. We have to face up to the fact that the greater the recession we face, the higher the levels of child and family poverty. That makes it more incumbent not just on the deputy First Minister and me but on all Ministers to ensure that we bring forward proposals that can alleviate and reduce those levels.

Child Abuse

6. **Mr McKay** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Executive will make recommendations on the form of the inquiry into historical institutional child abuse. (AQO 344/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: At their meeting on 7 July, the Executive discussed the interdepartmental task force recommendations and tasked junior Ministers to engage with victims and survivors over the summer months to seek their views on those recommendations. Since the Executive meeting, junior Ministers have met five victims' and survivors' groups. Ministers also met officials responsible for managing historical abuse inquiries in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. The information gathered will inform a report that will be submitted to the Executive before they make their final decision in the autumn on the nature of an inquiry.

Mr McKay: I thank the First Minister for his answer. I appreciate that this is a sensitive issue. However, does the First Minister recognise the concerns that many of those who suffered abuse have about the issue of compellability? Will the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister ensure that any inquiry has statutory powers?

Mr P Robinson: That is something on which the Executive have to decide. The Member is probably aware that we have received a report from the task force, which recommends a non-statutory inquiry. However, during the meetings with victims' groups, victims expressed a view that led us towards believing that they wanted a statutory inquiry. I am not sure whether all victims are aware of the pros and cons of a statutory inquiry, and, of course, there is the possibility of our looking at a proposition that might have some elements on a statutory basis and some not. I point out to the Member and, through the Assembly, to victims that, if we take the statutory route, the only statutory provision that is available presently would limit the period of an inquiry to between 1973 and 1989. I do not think that that would assist victims. If we, therefore, have to bring forward new legislation, it could be 18 months or two years before we could proceed.

Mr McDevitt: I acknowledge the work that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have done on the issue. I invite the First Minister to acknowledge to the House that it is about

getting it right rather than getting it quickly and that, ultimately, the needs of survivors will be met properly, albeit over a longer time, only if we have a fully independent, statutorily-based inquiry.

Mr Speaker: I urge the Member to come to a question.

Mr P Robinson: I acknowledge that it is important that we get it right. Of course, every party will have its own views, and not all victims agree on what the process should be. If we have a statutory inquiry, it is important that the statutory element does not increase the pain that victims have already gone through, and, in many cases, if they have to give evidence and be cross-examined, that may well do it. You cannot have a statutory inquiry where the only person obliged to give evidence and be cross-examined is the accused.

Ministerial Subcommittee on Children and Young People

7. **Mrs Lewis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the ministerial subgroup on children and young people. (AQO 345/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask my colleague junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer the question.

Mr Bell: The membership of the ministerial subcommittee on children and young people, chaired by junior Minister Anderson and me, includes all Ministers. The subcommittee was established with the ultimate aim of improving the lives of our children and young people.

There has been a lot of talk about government not being joined up and of Departments working in silos, so we have five groups. The safeguarding group is led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Department for Employment and Learning leads on the major issue of young people who are not in education, employment or training. The Department of Education leads on special educational needs and early years education, while the Department of Justice takes the lead in dealing with vulnerable young people.

2.30 pm

All the subgroups include senior officials from the relevant Departments, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is represented on each subgroup. The six objectives contained in the 10-year children and young people's strategy are: keeping our young people healthy; looking at their economic and environmental well-being; looking at how they can enjoy learning and achieving; looking at how they can contribute positively; looking at how they can live safely; and looking at how they can live in a society that respects their rights. We aim to place all those objectives at the heart of the Government's agenda.

Shortly, we will convene another meeting of the ministerial subcommittee to discuss how we progress work to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people here in line with our joint commitments on the overarching 10-year strategy for children and young people and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. A key focus of that discussion will be on how we can best integrate and streamline efforts across all our Departments to ensure the maximum impact on the priority issues for children and young people.

Justice

Mr Speaker: Questions 2 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Office of the Police Ombudsman

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the report by the Committee on the Administration of Justice on its review of the Office of the Police Ombudsman. (AQO 352/11-15)

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any communication between his private office, his Department and the Office of the Police Ombudsman in relation to a reduction in the level of independence of the Office of the Police Ombudsman. (AQO 355/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 4 together. The Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) report that was published on 16 June 2011 covers a wide range of issues, some of which pre-date devolution

and are not for me to judge. The report also addresses issues that are covered by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) in respect of historical cases. The CJINI report had the benefit of having had access to the relevant people and papers, and I have already set out my acceptance of its findings. The CAJ report also helpfully highlights the centrality of independence to the working of the office and the importance of perception regarding oversight. Those issues will be addressed in the discussion paper that I will produce in the autumn.

On the question of interaction with the ombudsman about the lowering of independence, I can confirm that I met the ombudsman to discuss the McCusker and CJINI reports, and I plan to meet him in early October to discuss implementation plans. My Department has already begun to provide support to the Office of the Ombudsman in that process and will continue to do so.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The CAJ report reveals that the person who chaired the interview panel that recommended Al Hutchinson for appointment is now the permanent secretary in the Department of Justice. Can the Minister assure the Assembly that his failure so far to recommend publicly that Al Hutchinson should step down is not tainted or jaundiced by advice from his permanent secretary, who, as I said, chaired the panel for the job? Further to that, will he underline that by joining me and a growing number of parties from this community —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should come to his question.

Mr McKay: — in calling on Mr Hutchinson to leave his office without further delay?

Mr Ford: I assure the Member and the entire House that, on 12 April last year, I made it clear to the staff of the Department of Justice that they now worked for the Department of Justice. That was the basis on which we operated. I have had no reason to doubt that that is the view of every senior official and junior official in the Department since that time. As for calling for people to resign, I refer the Member to the specific position in law: the role of appointing the ombudsman and, potentially, of calling on the ombudsman to resign is a role for the First

Minister and the deputy First Minister acting jointly, and for nobody else.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Does the Minister now accept that the independence of the ombudsman's office has been lowered to such an extent that the current ombudsman no longer enjoys the confidence of Sinn Féin, the SDLP and many families who were affected by the conflict?

Mr Ford: It is clear from the reports that have been published that there are concerns about the independence of the ombudsman's office. However, I refer the Member to what I said yesterday in debate: it is absolutely clear that the vast majority of the work that is being done by the ombudsman's office on current cases is proceeding well and is being received well by those who refer cases and those who receive reports back. The issue of dealing with historical matters has added complication to the work of the ombudsman's office, as he has acknowledged. It is clear that we require a functioning ombudsman's office to deal with current cases. The ombudsman has indicated his willingness to vacate the office as soon as a replacement is appointed.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister agree that the original role of the ombudsman's office, which he outlined, was to investigate current police cases where complaints are made and that, in that role, the ombudsman's office has done what anyone would describe as a reasonable job over that period? Does he also agree that changing its remit to include the investigation of Historical Enquiries Team cases has led to huge problems in the office?

Mr Ford: I agree with the Member on what the original perception may have been. The reality is that we are required to have an appropriate article 2 compliant mechanism in place for dealing with historical issues. The ombudsman's office currently provides that through the historical work that it does, and, at the moment, no alternative mechanism is in place. A number of other people, including Members but not the ombudsman, have a duty to find an alternative mechanism that might help this society as a whole to resolve all the outstanding issues of the past.

Mr McDevitt: The Minister must surely accept that, at this stage in the day, the current ombudsman's remaining in office is an obstacle

to the renewal of that office. Does he, as Minister of Justice, have confidence in Mr Al Hutchinson to be able to uphold the duties of the Office of the Police Ombudsman?

Mr Ford: No, I do not accept that the ombudsman's remaining in office at this stage is an obstacle. As I made clear in the debate yesterday afternoon, in the circumstances where the two other senior staff in the office are both acting up because the chief executive has resigned and the senior director of investigations is on long-term sick leave, it is clear that there will be major problems, which will be compounded by the issue of the ombudsman's being a corporation sole if he does not remain in post. I have discussed with him the work that has to be done to ensure that the structures and procedures are changed to make sure that there is full confidence in all the work of the office, including the historical work. That is the task that he has committed himself to doing in his remaining time in office, while others have the responsibility for appointing a replacement.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister confirm that the terms of reference for the CJI investigation this time were completely different to those for the previous CJI investigation and that it is therefore erroneous for people to draw conclusions that the ombudsman dealt well with the past previously but now does not? Does the Member agree that that question is still open and that we have to find a better way of dealing with it?

Mr Ford: I cannot confirm what the terms of reference for the work of CJINI were on this occasion, because it was the ombudsman himself who requested Dr Maguire to conduct the investigation that was published and given to me during the summer. It has been highlighted that there are major problems around how this society deals with the past, and it is clear that, at the moment, we have an imperfect mechanism. The institutions that deal with the past consist of the Police Service's Historical Enquiries Team, the historical work of the ombudsman and some legacy inquests. Therefore, the issue goes much wider than the ombudsman's office, and, frankly, this House and others have failed to address it.

Peace Lines: Belfast

3. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any plans he has to remove, change or adjust peace lines in the greater Belfast area.
(AQO 354/11-15)

Mr Ford: Recently, I announced two positive developments with regard to security barriers in north Belfast that have been brought about through engagement with local communities and multi-agency work. On 16 September, I opened a peace gate in the security fence at Alexandra Park, off the Limestone Road. That wall has divided the park since 1994. Agreement to open that new gate during the day follows much good work by the Alexandra Park steering group, which has driven the regeneration of the park as a shared space for all. I congratulate and thank the members of the steering group, statutory bodies, the community on either side and Groundwork NI for their work on that.

I also announced that we would work towards daytime opening of the security barrier at the junction of Newington Street and the Limestone Road. Again, the catalyst for change has come from the community, with co-operation from a range of agencies. My Department, in conjunction with community representatives and other agencies, is looking at other areas where positive change is possible. I am clear that community consent remains the key driver for change, and I recognise the work already done at interfaces by community groups to bring about the right conditions for change. However, there remain areas, such as inner east Belfast, where agreement for positive change does not yet exist.

Following the riots in east Belfast in June and in support of the review being carried out on behalf of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I commissioned a review of the security infrastructure in the area. I also visited the area to speak with local clergy, and officials in my Department have held meetings with community representatives and local residents to hear their concerns at first hand. Some work has been done to improve or repair security fences on the lower Newtownards Road, Cluan Place and Bridge End. In addition, the Bryson Community Enterprises building, which is being used as a launching pad for attacks across the interface and for other antisocial behaviour, has been made more secure. I am considering what

further measures need to be taken to ensure public safety and to protect property.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his very detailed answer and, specifically, for his reference to the inner east Belfast area. His answer demonstrates that he is aware of the concerns among the community, and I imagine that those concerns are not in east Belfast alone but on both sides of specific interfaces. When the Minister finds those genuine concerns and where police records indicate that conflict is going on, what action will he take? Could I just add to that, Mr Speaker, that —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question now.

Mr Newton: There is no value in members of another place putting forward motions to remove peace walls without consulting communities.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must insist.

Mr Ford: I have been encouraged from my left to pick one answer, so I will. There is every value in members of Belfast City Council demonstrating their willingness to provide a lead on dealing with the issue of peace walls in conjunction with local communities across the city.

Mr A Maginness: Hear, hear. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Copeland: The Minister must recognise that different types of peace walls exist in different sections of, primarily, Belfast for different reasons. It is vital that, when people raise those issues, they bear in mind the audience that they are addressing. For example, Mr Newton referred to the incident where comment was made and caused quite a lot of fear in one section of the community on one side of a wall in east Belfast and occasioned eight —

Mr Speaker: The Member should come to his question.

Mr Copeland: It occasioned eight people asking to be removed from their homes. So, will he undertake to ensure, in so far as he can, that, as he has said, the community is brought along at each stage of the process?

Mr Ford: We need to deal with the difference between what may be required as an operational response by the Police Service to particular incidents and the Department's duty to promote community safety to assist communities in

reaching the point where they no longer see walls as appropriate.

Mr A Maginness: I congratulate the Minister on his good work in relation to Alexandra Park and Newington Street. Furthermore, Belfast City Council is to be commended for its commitment to trying to deal with the problem in the city of Belfast. Does the Minister have any plans to systematically look at the walls that divide our citizens in the city of Belfast to see where more progress can be made on a programmatic basis?

Mr Ford: Mr Maginness raises a very significant point. The question is how far we are seeking to promote, on a wider basis, that which was carried through in the motion in Belfast City Council, to which he refers, or how far we are simply responding in an ad hoc way to wishes expressed by local communities. It seems to me that the significant movement in Alexandra Park and Newington Street in one week is an indication of the way that moods are changing. Certainly, where moods are changing, my Department will assist in any way it can. If that requires a more systematic examination of plans, I will be keen to hear from community representatives who wish to see movement forward.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Members who wish to ask a supplementary question really need to continue to rise in their place.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. From all that has been said in the past few minutes, does the Minister agree that the template used in Alexandra Park was discussion between the residents on both sides, as well as with the statutory bodies, over some 18 months? I am not arguing that it should take that long in any other case, but, if the core, the template is that discussion and agreement is needed, that is the way to move forward.

Mr Ford: I agree with Mr Kelly. I suppose that he, like Mr Maginness, wants to celebrate the fact that they, too, were in the park on Friday morning. The key issue was community engagement, which we have also seen in other areas, such as Suffolk/Lenadoon, where it was action by local people who wished to see an end to barriers that led to their removal. The important issue is to ensure that all the relevant statutory bodies co-operate in that respect. I

speak only for the Department of Justice and its agencies, but I am committed to my staff and the agencies that work with us doing anything that we can where people wish those barriers to be removed.

Courts: Filming

5. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Justice what action he intends to take to consult on the proposals to lift the court filming ban.

(AQO 356/11-15)

Mr Ford: Filming in courts in Northern Ireland is currently prohibited under the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 1945 and the Contempt of Court Act 1981. I have no plans to lift the ban on filming in courts in Northern Ireland. I have, however, asked my Department to watch how the plans recently announced in England and Wales, which will allow broadcasters to use footage of judgements handed down in certain courts, develop and to consider whether there are any lessons to be learned.

The potential impact of the presence of cameras in court proceedings on victims and witnesses would, of course, have to be weighed carefully when assessing the merits of lifting the ban, and their particular needs would need to be taken into account. It would also be essential to consider the views of the public, the judiciary and the legal profession through consultation.

Mrs Overend: Thank you for your answer, Minister. Do you agree that, if used just for sentencing, such proposals have the potential to drastically improve transparency and public confidence?

Mr Ford: From a position of limited knowledge, I am always reluctant to agree that something would “drastically” do anything in one way or the other. The interesting bit will be to see what happens in England and Wales. Examples of innovation are being trialled here: I understand that we are experiencing, for the first time, reporters commenting live from the courtroom via Twitter on a trial in a Northern Ireland court, although I am not quite sure how detailed arguments can be presented in 140 characters. However, the issue of whether justice is seen to be done merely by a judge being observed handing down the judgement does not necessarily convince me that that is the best way forward. I will consider evidence of what happens in England and Wales, and I will

ensure that we do that in a way that, most of all, fundamentally protects the needs of victims.

Mr Campbell: Before the Minister considers the installation of cameras in courts, would it not be a better use of his time to install cameras and implement closer scrutiny of those in custody, escaping from custody or whose health circumstances are such that they get out of custody?

Mr Ford: I am not aware of any issue that would relate to Mr Campbell’s latter point. If he was alluding to the quite proper recent review by the parole commissioners of the assessment of risk regarding one particular high-profile prisoner, Mr Brendan Lillis, he was querying the operation of a judicial process by the parole commissioners over which I have no control and on which I have no intention of commenting.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept in principle that some relaxation of the ban on filming in courts would be good, but that the priority has to be the protection and anonymity of victims and witnesses? Given that Northern Ireland has had show trials in the past, does he also accept that we would not want any theatre surrounding those sorts of trials?

Mr Ford: I agree that the key issue has to be to ensure the protection of victims and witnesses. If the trials to be conducted in England go ahead in accordance with what has been said by the Lord Chancellor, there may be some interesting evidence for us to consider. However, at this stage and in the absence of specific evidence as to why we should move, I do not regard lifting the ban as a priority.

Courts: Legal Aid Dispute

6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the progress that has been made in resuming normal business in the Crown Court following the decision of solicitors who were involved in the legal aid dispute to return to work. (AQO 357/11-15)

Mr Ford: Following discussions between officials from the Courts and Tribunals Service and representatives of both branches of the legal profession during August, the withdrawal action ended on 19 August, and defence lawyers returned to work. With the ending of the withdrawal action, arrangements were made by the Courts and Tribunals Service to allow solicitors to attend court to go back on record

for their clients as quickly as possible, thereby ensuring that defendants receive the advice and assistance they require without further delay. Virtually all the solicitors who came off record have now returned to normal working at the rate set in the amendment rules determined by the Assembly. I am confident that the arrangements in place will enable the remaining solicitors to go back on record.

At the height of the withdrawal action, 538 defendants were unrepresented. Now, however, well over 90% of them are represented by solicitors on record. Solicitors have also been asked to provide the court with an assessment of the state of readiness of each case to assist the listing of court business. I welcome the action of solicitors in returning to normal work, and I welcome the action of the judiciary, who have done significant work to ensure early listings of cases where possible.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer and commend him for his firm handling of an issue that has been neglected for too long; indeed, it has been neglected by some who wish it to be neglected much longer. Will the Minister tell the Assembly what the estimated annual savings will be as a result of his actions on Crown Court fees and whether he will be seeking additional savings from other areas of the legal aid budget?

Mr B McCrea: Well read. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Minister to speak.

Mr Ford: I am sure, Mr Speaker, that those Members who supported the work done to reform the Crown Court costs earlier in the year will welcome the fact that it is expected to save £18.3 million annually. However, issues remain to be addressed in the overall budget available for legal aid, which is still projected to be over budget on current spending patterns. Therefore, further work is needed.

The access to justice review that I announced last week will give further scope for making savings in other areas. Two further proposals will go to the Committee in the near future, which will represent a further potential saving of £1.7 million. It is clear that significantly more work has still to be done to reform legal aid costs in Northern Ireland.

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

an fhreagra sin. With regard to the proposal and the new regime, the Minister stated previously that there will be a review mechanism. Will he give us the timeline for when he thinks that that review mechanism will take place?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCartney for his question. During the discussions with the two branches of the profession, the Department, through the Courts and Tribunals Service, offered an early review of the operation of the new arrangements. We were prepared to offer it earlier than the two years that will be standard, potentially after something like six months. My understanding of the last bit of negotiation when I was on leave on 19 August was that neither branch of the profession was pressing for an early review. Therefore, I have indicated at this stage that we will keep the matter under consideration. It may be that the review will be early, or it may go the full two years. To some extent, it will depend on representations made to the Department. However, the position of the lawyers changed during those discussions.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the recommencement of court activity. Does the Minister agree that the public deserve not only a recommencement of normal activity but justice being delivered in a timely, fair and efficient manner and that there is considerable room for further improvement so that the experience of the public in the court system is greatly improved?

Mr Ford: Yes, Mr Speaker, I agree with Mr Beggs about the need for timely, fair and efficient operations of the courts. That has been one of my priorities since I became Minister. I believe that we have seen some significant progress over the past year or so, particularly in the work done between the Police Service and the Public Prosecution Service in ensuring proper and speedy preparation of files. I also welcome the fact that members of the judiciary have initiatives to manage court timetables much more efficiently and ensure that cases are presented in an orderly way and dealt with speedily. However, despite all that, Northern Ireland is much slower in court cases than other neighbouring jurisdictions, and I am keen to do what I can to speed things up. It affects the cost of legal aid and, due to the costs incurred in managing remand prisoners, the cost of the Prison Service. It is clear that there is much more to be done. However, I welcome the fact that a number of people have worked together

constructively to ensure that we have, at least, started that process.

Mr Weir: Although the Minister has referred to the fact that there are early listings in a number of the cases held up by the dispute, when will any backlog that may have built up be cleared, and when can we be confident that we will be back to business as usual?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that predicting the exact timing of court cases is beyond me. Some of the other initiatives under way to speed up matters, which I just mentioned to Mr Beggs, will ensure that we make progress on getting back to normal more quickly than we might otherwise have done. However, there will be a period of weeks in which there will still be issues around solicitors ensuring that they get their cases ready to proceed to court. There will be no lacking on the part of the Courts and Tribunals Service or, I believe, the judiciary, in assisting that process to happen.

Drivers: Insurance Premiums

7. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Justice what steps his Department is taking to reduce insurance premiums for drivers.

(AQO 358/11-15)

Mr Ford: A number of factors impact on the level of insurance premiums for drivers. I recognise that there are concerns that the way in which road traffic accident claims are handled in this jurisdiction contributes to the reported higher costs. I met the Consumer Council in September last year to discuss the issue, and, subsequently, my Department provided the council with statistical information to assist in its consideration of the matter. The Member may also be aware that the Office of Fair Trading announced recently that it is examining reports that private motor insurance costs across the UK are rising. As part of that work, the office will examine whether premiums are higher in this jurisdiction and, if so, it will examine the reasons why. I do not want to preempt the Office of Fair Trading findings, which are expected in December, but my officials will continue to support the examination.

As Members will know, other stakeholders in the justice system may also have to consider the findings of the Office of Fair Trading report. My Department will continue to work with everyone in the justice system to consider, and seek to

address, any concerns raised by the Office of Fair Trading.

Mr Wells: As the Minister knows, insurance claims in Northern Ireland are on average 80% higher than those in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is placing an impossible burden on families, particularly in rural areas, and on young drivers. Will the Minister's Department look at some way in which insurance claim cases can be heard by a lower court, as happens in the rest of the United Kingdom, in order to reduce the cost of processing those claims?

Mr Ford: Mr Wells makes a fair point about how we process claims. I am not sure whether moving things to a lower court would necessarily result in that big a saving in the level of damages awarded. There would, of course, be the option to take matters out of courts entirely, as is the case with our neighbours in the Republic. I accept Mr Wells's point that there are concerns about the way in which the system operates, particularly around personal injuries, the level of compensation and the way in which that then reflects on premiums paid. I am not sure that it is going to be easy to solve, but we are prepared to look at the options for my Department.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer, in which he touched on my question. What steps is he taking to ensure that insurance claims, the level of claims and the payouts are decided by groups that are representative of wider society, rather than being left with the legal profession? He hinted that the Irish have a different way of doing things.

Mr Ford: I trust that my constituency colleague is not encouraging me to disagree with the judiciary and the way it carries out its current duties. Some years ago, the system was changed and rather than compensation claims being judged in front of juries and juries having a say in the amounts paid, they were brought to the judiciary. At that time, it was expected that that would reduce costs, but, in fact, it made no significant difference. There are, therefore, issues about the way in which precedents have been established, and it may be that we need to move to a more fundamental reform than Mr Wells or Mr Kinahan hinted at if we are to see real change in how things operate here.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his previous answers. There has been much debate,

particularly this year, about the reduction in legal costs. Will the Minister indicate whether consideration has been given, if there is a reduction in legal costs, to whether there can be negotiation with insurance companies to reduce their premiums as a result?

Mr Ford: I am not sure who might negotiate with the insurance companies about such matters, although I suspect that there may be a role for bodies such as the Office of Fair Trading or the Consumer Council. The reductions in legal costs that we have implemented at this stage have been solely around criminal defence work. The issue of the costs that are awarded in civil cases or the specific ways in which courts manage civil cases is still under review. I urge the Member and others to look at 'Access to Justice Review Northern Ireland: The Report' and contribute in that context.

3.00 pm

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am looking for some guidance on the process that allows a Minister to group questions. Is that a matter for the Minister concerned or is it decided in conjunction with the Business Office?

I have a second question. If a Member is tabled as one of the 15 lead questioners, are they entitled to ask a supplementary question?

Mr Speaker: On your first point, grouping questions is really up to the Minister. As Speaker, I have no role in that whatsoever.

On your further question, it is up to whoever is in the Chair at the time to call Members to ask supplementary questions. When I or my deputies call Members for supplementary questions, we have to be very careful of the balance in the House. We have to be careful, because a Member could be leading on a particular issue in the House. We also could have a Member leading on a particular issue within his or her constituency. Sometimes, Members believe that we sit up here and just call Members willy-nilly. We do not do that. We are very careful in how we call Members from all parties for supplementary questions. I know that there will be occasions when Members pop up and down in their place but do not get in. Hopefully, Members will understand why that is. I would like to think that all parties are doing reasonably well when it comes to Question Time and, especially, in asking supplementary questions.

Private Members' Business

Newly Qualified Teachers

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

Mr Craig: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of newly qualified teachers leaving full-time study without employment, or with little prospect of it; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Employment and Learning, to address the situation.

I want to clarify one issue before we start. Statements have been put out questioning the accuracy of some of the figures quoted earlier today. I remind the House that I was quoting figures that were supplied under AQW 777/11-15 in answer to a question from Mr Alex Easton. Those figures were signed off by no less than the deputy First Minister or Acting deputy First Minister — I am not quite sure of his title — our present Minister of Education, Mr O'Dowd. I want that clarified, Mr Speaker. There may be a question as to whether a Member of the House was misled or whether the Minister was misled regarding that issue.

Teaching used to be viewed as a safe job; one with security, good career prospects and rewards.

A Member: Good holidays.

Mr Craig: Good holidays; I agree. There are a few former teachers in the Chamber, and one is a Government Minister. It is, however, no longer the case that teaching is a safe job. In June this year, the Education Minister, Mr O'Dowd, responded to reports of an increase in teacher redundancies. Without doubt, many of those redundancies have been ushered in by the cutbacks in our block grant after the publication of the comprehensive spending review by Her Majesty's Government last October. That had a dramatic effect on public funds, not only in education.

As the axe has fallen on all Government Departments, it has obviously had an impact on education and library boards, which have less to spend on schools. That has impacted on

the number of teachers that can be employed. The Minister's statement that I referred to was in response to redundancies, which included teaching staff and classroom assistants. The majority of those redundancies were voluntary, but very few of those positions will be filled because there is no longer the money in the system to pay for them.

Earlier this year, the Public Accounts Committee demonstrated that the costs of providing substitute teachers had soared from £38 million in 2000 to £66 million in 2008. It also emerged that a large number of retired teachers were being re-employed through agencies to provide teaching cover in the classroom, for whatever reason. That poses problems for newly qualified teachers because, after graduation, many of them rely increasingly on agencies to secure work, albeit part time and temporary. That leaves a huge number of qualified teachers unemployed and questioning why they trained in the first place when they are likely to walk into a job that they could have had after their GCSEs, never mind A levels.

I know of many who spent many years training or without teaching work and have had to resort to jobs in the service sector or to look for something else to pay off the huge debt that they have found themselves in. Many young teachers have had a significant amount of money invested in them by the Government, which is ultimately wasted when they cannot secure jobs. The reason for the number of qualified teachers is down to the fact that, a number of years ago, we were crying out for teachers and could not get enough of them. Now, the tables have turned and a large number of teachers are left to claim unemployment benefit or work in a job for which they are well and truly overqualified, just to pay the bills.

A report issued by the Department of Education in 2006 found that a significant number of teaching posts went unfilled. They were in English, maths, science, home economics, technology and design, history and PE. Many of those are fields that are crucial to the economy and general skills of this country. Ironically, that report anticipated teacher shortages over time. However, the general view is that there are far too many qualified teachers trying to meet that demand. Statistics provided by the Department of Education in reply to a question for written answer show that the number of newly qualified teachers obtaining full-time permanent

employment within one year of graduation is extremely low. This year, that figure fell to almost 5% from 11% in 2006-07. Furthermore, the number of teachers securing employment outside Northern Ireland is extremely low. That is very worrying, and I seek to highlight it. I urge the Minister of Education and the Minister for Employment and Learning to take note. We need action on all of that.

It is regrettable that the Department cannot match supply with demand. That is a major issue. Why, as a Government, are we continually training graduate teachers for jobs that, frankly, are not there? That is a huge waste of government resources and something that I appeal to the Minister to look into to get a much closer relationship between supply and demand in that field.

The other huge difficulty that teachers have when they apply for the few full-time jobs that exist is that of experience. That is incredibly difficult for new graduate teachers coming out of colleges. I appeal to the Minister to look at the system that is being piloted in Scotland, which guarantees almost a year's full-time training in schools to, at least, give them one year's experience in teaching. That would be a big help to new graduates in finding jobs.

That is not unique in other fields of industry. I went to the University of Ulster, and the course that I took, which was mechanical engineering, guaranteed one year spent in industry. The experience that I gained in that year was invaluable for finding employment. It was a great boost, and most of the graduates from my year got employment because of that bit of experience. I appeal to the Executive to have a close look at that.

I want to quote a few lines that have come in to me since this debate was mentioned. Here is a man whose two sons who have graduated from Stranmillis University College, and this letter maybe puts these real issues into perspective:

"One of the boys has been fortunate enough to have been employed for the past three years, even though those have been in three different schools. He has, for the first time, managed to secure a one-year contract in his fourth school this year, and he hopes that that will become permanent. The younger son graduated from Stranmillis in July of this year, and, unfortunately, he has not been able to secure any employment. He has managed

to get three days as a substitute teacher since September”.

I will try not to be party political about this at all. That was about Stranmillis. I also have a letter from someone who went to St Mary's University College:

“I am a qualified teacher that graduated from St Mary's University College in 2005. I have not been able to secure a full-time post in that length of time”.

That is regrettable, and the fact that it occurs is absolutely regrettable for the individuals. I ask the Minister to look at the issue. Let us more carefully match supply and demand, but let us also look at ways to give limited experience to teachers so that they can secure employment.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Members for bringing this issue to the Floor. I welcome the opportunity to debate it. It is important, and all parties agree that the Department should ensure that opportunities for newly qualified teachers are increased and that they should get experience as soon as possible after qualifying. The Department clearly has taken steps on the issue of prematurely retired teachers, and changes to the common funding scheme, which came before the Education Committee earlier this month, will discourage prematurely retired teachers from returning to work post retirement. Obviously, there are limitations on people's right to employment, but no doubt the Department is exploring what it can do and acting upon that.

Monitoring the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers, encouraging the use of the substitute register, having employing authorities bear the cost of granting premature retirement to teachers and changes to the common funding scheme are all to be welcomed. The Member who spoke previously referred to a number of personal cases, and it is worth remembering that, when teachers get a placement, they should be treated fairly.

3.15 pm

We hear examples of substitute teachers who gain employment in September and work through to June, but, quite deliberately in a number of cases, are then dropped to save the payment of two months' wages. Of course, many substitute teachers are brought in on a daily rate for a long time, and, when that happens, it might be because of tight budgets or because of circumstances in that school. However,

regardless of that, it is totally unacceptable. It is wrong that teachers have to get by from week to week and face the pressures that come with that. Those are pressures that many people in other jobs do not have to face.

The Department should ensure that employment opportunities for teachers are maximised. That means addressing the need for mutual recognition of teaching qualifications across the entire country. When the Minister is summing up, perhaps he would update us on what work is being undertaken with his counterpart in the Dáil, Ruairí Quinn.

The issue is one of cuts across and between the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning. One must consider that the overall intake to initial teacher training courses has reduced in recent years by some 25%. However, I take on board the point made by the motion's proposer, which is that we need to try to match supply to demand, but that is a very complex process.

We should always be open to looking at practices in other jurisdictions to see what benefits they have, but the Scottish example has yet to be proven. However, it is important that the Department at least keeps an eye on how that goes. I agree with the general thrust of the motion and look forward to listening to the rest of the debate. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McNarry: I will deviate slightly. Following on from Kathryn Torney, Lindsay Fergus continues to provide excellent analysis and factual information in her coverage on education in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. Last week, the paper launched the Clarke manifesto, which is a 10-point advisory directive to all of us. Specifically referring to children, Liam Clarke advised that schools must be encouraged to share teachers and facilities, regardless of religion. He said that our segregated teacher training colleges should also be encouraged to co-operate and that the mess left by Caitríona Ruane over the 11-plus must be resolved by her successor John O'Dowd.

His advice may well be a bit of journalistic bravado, but, on that issue, he is bang on the button with advice that I believe is worth heeding. We are not alone in having to handle unprecedented unemployment among young teachers, and it comes at a time when it has emerged that the National Institute of Economic and Social Research now clearly suggests that

the recovery from the recession will be slower than that from the Great Depression of the 1930s. It has also emerged that only one in five teachers in Scotland were able to find work, and almost another fifth were forced to pursue another career or leave Scotland altogether to find a job.

In respect of workforce planning, the situation of newly trained teachers has to be seen within the context of a low pupil:teacher ratio, which is 14.7 for post-primary schools and 20.2 for primary schools across Northern Ireland. The overall Northern Ireland pupil:teacher ratio is 16.11, which compares with 16.6 in England, 17.6 in Wales, and 13.3 in Scotland. That is a reflection of the drop in pupil numbers, which has led to the situation of unfilled desks in our schools. Therefore, we really have reached a moment of truth in the education system. That is why, last week, I called for the Department of Education to establish what we possess in respect of the schools estate and also where we stand in respect of the deployment of the teaching workforce and its backup administrative support. The demands being imposed by budgetary cutbacks inevitably mean that we need to get the best possible value for money, and we cannot know what we are doing without the kind of information that I have asked the Minister to provide, along with a planned exercise.

Whichever way one looks at it, it is clear that there has been an increase in the teacher workforce at a time of low pupil:teacher ratios across the education service and at a time when pupil numbers have, thankfully, remained relatively stable. School pupil numbers across all sectors are projected to increase by around only 5,000 net by 2016-17, with around 4,000 more in primary schools and fewer than 1,000 more in the post-primary sector. The increase in primary enrolment bodes well for the post-2016-17 primary school teacher workforce, but the effect of that will not work its way into secondary schools until 2023-24. The work-planning issues that that raises, in assessing how many teachers we need to train by sector over the next decade, have to be set in the context of the number of currently unemployed teachers by sector. We need to know what the net picture is. We need to see it.

How many will desert teaching permanently because they are disappointed that the Careers Service has pointed them in the direction of a career without enough jobs to sustain the

numbers that are being trained? I call on the Minister to address not only the situation that has arisen with unemployed graduate teachers but all the complex situations facing the education service. If he has a plan, hopefully it will be forthcoming and will be a priority plan. I am personally willing to share information with him on what we need to do and will have to do to put right the situation in the education service.

Mr McDevitt: I join colleagues in thanking Mr Craig for bringing the motion to the Assembly. It takes us to the heart of some of the big, strategic challenges that face the education system — challenges that always seem to come back, in one way or another, to the system's inability to plan for its own future. It puzzles me that a system that has been with us for so long, in which we have such a vested interest in getting right and of which we spend so much time celebrating the achievements should have some fundamentally big management problems — problems that just do not seem to go away but instead repeat themselves again and again and again. I think that it would be unfair to lay the blame for those problems at the current Minister's door. To be fair, they pre-date his being in post. We all know him to be a man who is capable of taking on more than one job at the best of times, and we look forward to his leadership showing through so that, at last, we can begin to address the issue.

As the Deputy Chairperson said, it is right to wonder about what happens when sixth-form pupils sit down with their careers adviser and are advised to become a teacher. They are told that teaching is a great job with loads of career prospects, only to discover, three or four years later, like all too many newly qualified teachers from whichever institution, that that, in fact, was a false promise. It is also right to wonder about how we are able to plan for our health service in a way that seems to understand and get ahead of demographic trends and birth rates when, for some reason, that does not seem to be a particularly important, measurable thing in our education system.

All of that is simply context. The issue at hand is, frankly, the management of a crisis. I acknowledge the many vested interests at play here and the right of people who have served a career in teaching and who, through no fault of their own, have found themselves redundant to be able to consider themselves as possible candidates for future employment. However, is that a greater right than the right of a newly

qualified teacher to a job? I think that it is about time that we got real about that question.

Does someone who, through no fault of their own, finds themselves out of work but with a redundancy package — maybe an enhanced one — have a greater right to employment than someone who is at the other end of their career? It is a question that Ruairí Quinn, the Minister for Education and Skills in the Republic, sought to address in June. He did so by issuing a circular to all schools in which he basically told them to give preference to newly qualified teachers. He said, "That is my advice. I cannot force you to do it. But, as Minister, using all my political and moral authority that comes with that office, I tell you that, in my opinion, people who are beginning their careers deserve a break around here. I want you to be at the heart of giving them that break."

We are told that it might cost up to £20 million each year to introduce a one-year guaranteed employment scheme for teachers in the region. Fair enough: I do not dispute the figures. However, the counter-question needs to be asked: how much does it cost us not to do that? How much does it cost us to educate teachers who end up on the broo? How much does it cost us to rehire very qualified teachers who may already have received redundancy payments at the public purse's expense and, we understand, are being rehired at higher rates of pay than newly qualified teachers? If the Minister addresses those questions, we may all be able to come to an informed view about the merits or otherwise of the one-year internship or professional placement scheme for teachers. However, I do not think that we can. I suspect, in his defence, that the figures are probably not available anyway. That comes back to the basic issue at the heart of the debate, which is a structural, cultural issue that makes it difficult for the system to be able to strategically plan and match its resources to needs.

I do not want to open up the wider issues because that would be unfair. However, I would like the Minister — I will end here —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McDevitt: I would like the Minister to acknowledge that it is not simply OK to leave the issue to be sorted out by market forces.

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

Mr Lunn: Like other Members, I am glad that Mr Craig has brought the matter before the House. For those of us who are on the Committee for Education, it has been a concern for some years. The Public Accounts Committee has also reported on the situation, particularly with regard to substitute teachers. Thankfully, the Department is now moving to address that issue by limiting the amount of money that it contributes towards the cost of a substitute teacher. That is long overdue. It may be necessary to go further. Hopefully, it will mean that newly qualified teachers will, at least, get some classroom experience.

I have nothing but sympathy for the hundreds of teaching graduates — a number that has built up over several years — who entered university and teacher training full of hope and expectation only to find that there are no jobs and few prospects and that they are forced to seek employment in other areas. Most teachers enter the profession because they believe that they are following a vocation — a difficult but vital vocation. We must wonder at the lack of forward planning that has produced the extraordinary outcome of so many teachers who are surplus to requirements.

These days, all the information is available to predict trends in birth rates, the number of empty desks, retirement rates and class sizes. We constantly hear it quoted that there will be 50,000 empty desks in the education system. Do we still base our calculations for the number of teachers who are needed on false and out-of-date assumptions? Do we not know how many teachers are due to retire from year to year? Whatever method is being used, it has produced an intolerable situation. Today, I hear that 5% of this year's graduates will find work. I do not query the accuracy of that figure as it stands, but, as it is early days, I would hope that it would improve, and I have some reservations about it.

The more telling figures are those from the past few years. The last figures that I saw, which were produced by the General Teaching Council, show a rapid downward trend in employment rates leading to a figure of around 22% for the class of 2010. That figure is frightening.

3.30 pm

Mr P Maskey: I sat on the PAC with the Member last term. With regard to the number of teachers who qualify every year, I take the point that we

need to look seriously at the re-employment of recently retired teachers and at the fact that that does not give employment opportunities to young teachers who have recently graduated. However, look at, for example, the number of politics students who graduate every year. How many jobs do those people get in politics? The same applies to newly graduated bioscientists. If you look at all new graduates in isolation, how do we work that out? It is wrong for us to look at one specific group of people — in this case, teachers. If you go through all the universities, you will see that there are people who graduate from many different courses who do not get a job in the field related to those courses.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: He probably used about a minute, Mr Speaker, but not to worry. I take the point, but I will not compare teachers to politics students, because I might ask why anybody would become a politics student, frankly. I will move on.

I would query the need for more than one training college, but, in the current training system, there are almost 1,500 students at various stages of their qualification. Those students must wonder what the future holds. On current performance, it would be optimistic even to say that 1,200 of them will not move into teaching after graduation. A large proportion will never do so and already have no prospect of becoming a full-time teacher during their working life.

We can add to that the inevitable changes that are coming over the horizon whether we like it or not. None of those will increase teacher requirements. I am talking about the ESA — if we ever get there — which is supposed to be an efficiency measure. I am also talking about sustainable schools, area-based planning and the urgent rationalisation of our various school systems. If the Minister can bring about the changes in those areas that we all know are necessary and cannot be put off for ever, there will be an inevitable reduction in the number of teaching posts available.

There is a massive challenge here for the Minister of Education, and I wish him well with it. We cannot justify the current level of teacher training or, frankly, the number of institutions providing it. I know that that involves the Minister for Employment and Learning as well. We need to encourage teachers who feel that they have contributed enough to their profession to leave, and we should facilitate their exit. If

there are ways to do that, I would like to hear about them so that we can make room for new blood.

I always go back to the issue of substitute teachers. We need to ensure that only in exceptional circumstances can a retired teacher be used for substitution over a suitably qualified new teacher. The term “exceptional circumstances” has been used in departmental circulars since the 1980s.

As others said, the information given to students who choose the university pathway should include, if it does not already, a clear indication of the job prospects and the kind of statistics that prompted this debate.

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

Mr Lunn: I agree with Mr McDevitt about the guaranteed year; he put the case for that very eloquently. The current situation is not sustainable, and I look forward to the Minister's comments.

Miss M McIlveen: I declare an interest as someone who was once a newly qualified teacher, although that was more years ago now than I care to admit.

Mr McDevitt is correct when he speaks of careers advice. I was not advised against teaching, and, for Mr Lunn's information, I was advised against studying politics. I ignored that advice, trained as a politics teacher and ended up here. There is a moral to that story somewhere.

I thank my colleagues on the Education Committee for securing the debate. However, like many motions regarding education that come before the Chamber, there is a certain sense of groundhog day. That is by no means a criticism of the motion. It was in June 2007, over four years ago, that the employment prospects of newly qualified teachers were first raised with the Minister's predecessor in a notice of motion before the Assembly, and here we are again debating the issue.

Mr Craig: I thank the Member for giving way. I recall that debate four years ago, and the one thing that I find remarkable is that the situation with the recruitment of new teachers has got worse. Two years ago, almost 14% found employment straight away. Last year, it was 10%. This year, it is 5%. So, although I agree

with you that we are having a bit of a groundhog day, it is, unfortunately, now far worse for those who went through teacher training this year than those who did so four years ago, which I think you will agree is regrettable.

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

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I concur with my colleague's remarks, and it has taken a considerable time to start to address that issue.

In June, the Committee was briefed on measures that have been introduced to encourage the employment of newly qualified teachers. Mr McKay referred to those. Guidance was given that advised that the Northern Ireland substitute teacher register should be used when booking all substitute teachers. However, languishing on the substitute teacher register does not give you the experience that you need to secure long-term employment. It serves as a stopgap but is not a solution to this problem, and, of course, guidance is simply guidance and can be ignored by schools.

The Department also advised that the reimbursement of teacher substitution costs was limited, to provide an incentive for schools to employ newly or recently qualified teachers. Again, that argument does not stack up. Capping costs in no way encourages schools to employ newly or recently qualified teachers. All it meant was that a maximum amount would be paid, whatever the experience of the teacher.

We were also advised that the Department has been monitoring the re-employment of prematurely retired teachers on a monthly basis since September 2010. However, that is more than three years after the debate about newly qualified teachers about which I spoke earlier. The wheels grind ever slowly in the Department, and the reason for that monitoring, we are told, is to seek an explanation why those teachers are being re-employed in preference to others.

The rules of the teachers' pension scheme mean that retired teachers may see a reduction in their pension if employed as a teacher. That seems entirely proper. However, it does not stop the re-employment happening. The Department also stated that a measure to encourage the employment of newly qualified teachers has been the requirement that employing authorities bear the costs of granting

premature retirement to teachers. That caused me a little head scratching, particularly when I am informed that, as a result, there has been a dramatic reduction in premature retirements since 2008, with none granted since April 2010. That is to be expected, but how is it of assistance to newly qualified teachers? The Department said that that reduced the stock of prematurely retired teachers and schools will, therefore, need to look more frequently to newly qualified and other non-retired teachers when filling vacancies. However, surely the fact that there are no spaces due to teachers not being granted premature retirement means that there are no spaces for newly qualified teachers as a result.

Last month, the Minister finally announced changes that would be of benefit to newly qualified teachers. Among them was the requirement that schools would be liable for the total cost of employing a prematurely retired teacher. That, more than any of the previous so-called measures, should prove to be an incentive for schools to take on newly qualified teachers, but the question is "Why has it taken so long, and is it enough?". From my experience, however, that is still providing only window dressing. Unless, as my colleague stated, a newly qualified teacher is lucky enough to obtain employment or cover for maternity leave or long-term sick leave, he or she will have extreme difficulty completing their probationary training year. Until that is addressed, there will be continuing problems facing newly and recently qualified teachers in obtaining employment. As I pointed out, that becomes increasingly difficult when fewer vacancies are available due to the reduction in premature retirements, and, in the meantime, we are producing more and more teachers.

I accept what the Minister stated about a 25% reduction in the past five years, but I also understand the need for flexibility in the model. However, that has not managed the expectation of those training to be teachers that they will get the necessary experience to find permanent positions. Four years ago, cost was the excuse for not providing a McCrone-style agreement guaranteeing an induction year. We have heard figures of £12 million for year 1 and £20 million in subsequent years.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Miss M McIlveen: I would like the Minister to qualify what those costs mean. I understand that McCrone is being reviewed, and I look forward to the outcome and how that will assist in future discussions in relation to Northern Ireland.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an díos póireacht seo. I welcome the debate, which is relevant to both the Minister and Department of Education and to the Minister and Department for Employment and Learning. I am pleased that the Minister of Education and the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, in the absence of the Employment and Learning Minister, are present for the debate.

I share concerns about any newly qualified teacher leaving full-time study without employment or with a limited prospect of employment. I have close family knowledge of that, as a relation of mine had to diversify and, after a period of unemployment, took up a post teaching essential skills as part of the Steps to Work programme. It was pointed out to me just today that, in the current economic climate, few graduates walk straight into employment in any discipline, which, of course, is unfortunate. For example, a good number of recently qualified speech and language therapists have to emigrate to secure employment. That is very challenging. Teachers are not alone in suffering the experience of not having the guarantee of a job after full-time education.

Statistics are often quoted giving the percentage of full-time students who are not employed three months after leaving full-time study. Although I stand to be corrected, I understand that 87% of those who graduate from St Mary's University College, Belfast have managed to secure full-time employment after four years, which is a considerable time. I ask the Minister of Education whether he has any figures to hand and whether he could combine, for example, figures for annual intakes to initial teacher education at Stranmillis, St Mary's and Queen's and compare those with the number of local students who travel to England for teacher training. I understand that the latter figure may be greater than the former.

I commend the Department of Education for initiating measures aimed at advantaging newly qualified teachers over retired teachers in the

management of substitute cover. I would like to hear more detail on that when the Minister responds to the debate.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for giving way. Is it not ironic that this morning we talked about underachievement in many schools in disadvantaged areas and now we are talking about a surplus of teachers? Does the Member agree that there must be some way of marrying the various Department initiatives, from OFMDFM's social investment fund right down to neighbourhood renewal? Surely we can marry those initiatives with the surplus of young, talented and ambitious qualified teachers who are becoming very disillusioned when they finish training.

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

Mr McElduff: I thank Mr Douglas for his point, which I am sure the Minister has heard and absorbed. I agree that creative thinking is needed to ensure meaningful employment and to marry the various government policies.

In conclusion, I take this opportunity to record my sympathy on the recent passing of the northern secretary of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), Mr Frank Bunting, who was a champion of social justice and teachers' rights. I want to think about him at this time.

3.45 pm

Lord Morrow: In a statement on 10 June, the Minister of Education said:

"Due to movement in the system there is always a certain level of redundancies; however the level is far below that of around five years ago when the figure was regularly over 500. Furthermore, the majority of these are voluntary redundancies."

He continued:

"Furthermore, over the last five years the number of teacher training posts has been cut by almost 25%, reflecting the expected future demand for teachers."

Those startling figures tell the story.

Today's debate is timely. I suspect that every MLA around the Chamber could cite instances of young teachers who have recently qualified and are waiting for a post. Indeed, I am aware of one young teacher who qualified some eight

years ago and has not, to date, got a full-time teaching post. Just imagine the demoralisation that that causes to people who have gone through the rigours of third-level education, prepared for the teaching profession that they wanted to enter and discovered at the end of it all that there is no future in it for them.

We will not prejudice the Minister, but it is an issue that he needs to take very seriously. I hope that he takes it a bit more seriously than his predecessor did. She left a lot to be desired. It came across that the issue was not important to her. We will give the new Minister the opportunity to demonstrate in clear and unambiguous terms that he takes the matter seriously and will put the future of young, recently qualified teachers at the top of his list of priorities. Society as a whole demands that.

Another issue needs to be examined and tackled, and I would like the Minister to comment on it when he responds to the debate. We hear constantly of teachers retiring, picking up their redundancy package and, in a very short time, being back in the teaching system. Were there not a large pool of young graduates and ably qualified teachers ready to take up those posts, that might be all right. That is another challenge for the Minister. He should take a long, hard, serious look at teachers who retire and immediately re-enter the teaching profession. When there is a pool of able and capable teachers waiting to take up posts, it cannot be right by anyone's standards.

No one here would say that the teaching profession is not vital to the future well-being of Northern Ireland, as it prepares young people for the future. However, there is something drastically wrong with a system that cannot provide for highly qualified young professionals coming into the teaching stream. Surely, there is a case to be made that young teachers coming into the profession are more able than those who have retired and left the system just to re-enter it. I recognise that they bring experience, but new teachers come in with new ideas, techniques and abilities. If the present Minister will take that on board, he will do a service not only to the young professionals but to society as a whole. I trust that this is one issue that he will concentrate some of his efforts on and that he will not let us down in the way that the previous Minister did. She was quite flippant; she showed no regard and brought no professionalism to the matter at all.

I suspect that this Minister might be different. I urge him to be different and not to take his cue from the previous Minister. I urge him to ensure that young teachers preparing for the teaching profession have a future.

Furthermore, if the present system continues, it will discourage people from qualifying as teachers. I trust that the Minister will ensure that that does not happen either. Otherwise, we will end up with a teaching profession that no one wants to enter because there is —

Mr Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr B McCrea: A number of points have been raised, and it might be worth looking at the facts in response to those. Mr McDevitt asked why we keep going over the same issue again and again. He and Mr Lunn asked why we did not plan for the number of teachers required. I also want to deal with the issue that Lord Morrow raised about substitution.

The first thing to say is that we tried to deal with it before. We realised that there was going to be a problem. The Minister of Education at the time, Caitríona Ruane, produced figures for the teachers that we would require, fed them to the Minister for Employment and Learning, Sir Reg Empey, and discovered that she had inadvertently closed St Mary's College on the Falls Road because there were not sufficient teachers to make it viable. There then transpired a bit of negotiation to the effect that we could not have that, so we inflated the numbers again to make sure that St Mary's was viable. To be fair, we also inflated the figures for Stranmillis to make it viable.

I can tell you what the figures are now. To do the initial teacher education in Stranmillis — it will read across to St Mary's — we need 80 primary, 50 post-primary and 15 postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) places, but we have an additional 277 to do extra stuff, which is not costed. It is costed only for a three-year process, and that period is coming to an end. The situation is not viable. People ask me where that number came from. It was actually published in the Hansard report of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) meeting on 16 September 2010. My colleague Mr Beggs asked:

“Are we training too many teachers and bringing students in who build up loans, with little prospect of a post being available at the end of the course?”

Mr Sweeney, the permanent secretary, said:

“In response to that stark choice, we have reduced the intake by 27%. As a result, we will reach a critical mass threshold, below which we might erode the viability of local institutions. That would be a bold decision to take”.

What is actually happening is that we refused to close St Mary's because of political considerations. We have actually produced more teachers than we can find positions for.

Mr P Maskey: I have the figures that Mr McElduff gave earlier. After four years, there is an 87% employment rate among students from St Mary's. That is one hell of a good return. That rate is absolutely excellent.

Mr B McCrea: I am thankful for the Member's intervention. I believe that he was the Chair of the Committee —

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

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me read out what it says in the Hansard report of that Committee. The Department told the Committee:

“of the 792 teachers who graduated in 2009 from institutions in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, only 200, which is 25%, have obtained either a permanent or part-time teaching post.”

That is by February 2010. More generally, 2,456 teachers who had graduated over the period 2004-09 had still not been able to obtain a teaching post in 2009-2010. The figures are stark. Mr Lunn said it, and I agree with him: we have too many teacher training facilities. We are producing too many teachers for the vacancies that we have.

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

The figures are stark for the demand from people who want to teach because they have a vocation and want to do it. In 2011-12, the prediction is — I have them for the whole bit — that there will be 1,922 applicants to Stranmillis alone for only 233 places. There is huge demand. What do they do if they do not get a place? They go to England, where there is a demand. They train there and then come back

and are in a better position to get a job than our people. The Minister raises his eyes. That is the position.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry; I have 30 seconds. You can deal with it in your reply.

The issue comes to this: we will shortly have to look at the merger of Stranmillis and Queen's, and, for my money, we have to bite the bullet and look at St Mary's as well. We are producing too many teachers, and there are not enough jobs. It is absolutely unfair. The Minister should take a decision and do what is right and proper to manage the labour supply of teachers.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the Education Committee, I welcome the debate. I understand that we have enough teachers in some areas but not enough in others, such as special needs, Irish-medium education, science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and basic literacy and numeracy. Along with school principals, boards of governors and others involved in the management of schools, we need to do more to ensure that qualified teachers get into employment. We need to ensure that that is done through the use of the substitute register. I acknowledge the fact that the Department of Education has issued guidance to employers on that issue, but it needs to be fully reinforced and more robust. It is important that students who seek to enter teacher training colleges are advised about shortages and priorities in relation to courses. It is important that their specific training reflects what is needed in the school system in the long term.

I do not want to dwell on what has already been said. I want to share with the House what a young qualified teacher of four years' standing said to me when she heard that the motion was to be debated today. Her only employment in that four-year period has been up to six months a year as a substitute teacher. Like many others, it is her desire to have a full-time teaching position; in fact, she would even settle for a full part-time position. She has applied for what limited vacancies arise but to no avail. There has been no opportunity to get employment. She is willing to travel any distance, except abroad, to teach and to gain permanent employment. She studied here for

four years to make a contribution to society through something that she is passionate about. She refuses to go abroad like many of her friends and colleagues in the teaching profession. She is from a teaching background; her parents and siblings are teachers. There are many issues that she has had to endure in the four years since she qualified as a teacher. She does not tick a box for anything. She is unable to gain hire purchase for a car. She cannot access any benefits for the two months in the summer recess during which she is unemployed. She has no way of getting a loan, and nor can she afford to pay any loans back. She is getting into debt through family members. As a result, her mental health and well-being are suffering. She has nothing to show for all her years of training. She told me that she is aware that there are substitute teachers who have been qualified for more than four years who are being paid by the week. This girl lives one mile from Lifford but cannot avail herself of teaching posts in the South because of the different curriculums. That issue also needs to be addressed.

In November 2010, up to 2,500 teachers were seeking employment. I am sure that that figure has risen. The re-employment of retired teachers for substitution is wholly unacceptable. In the interest of fairness, the situation where newly qualified teachers are desperately seeking teaching opportunities should be addressed. The House would acknowledge that, in the current climate, there are limited opportunities for employment in all walks of life. However, the issue that we are debating must be addressed as soon as possible and as a matter of urgency.

4.00 pm

Mr D McIlveen: I, too, welcome the motion. The Member must be congratulated on proposing it.

There is no doubt that the supply and demand for graduates to teaching positions is out of kilter, so something must be done about it urgently. However, I have more specific concerns about existing inequalities between newly qualified Catholic and Protestant teachers. Those concerns are clearly demonstrated by the example of those who have graduated with PGCE and primary-school teaching qualifications. Currently, in Northern Ireland, around 50% of primary schools are Catholic maintained and 50% are controlled. The official

2010-11 figures are: 383 controlled and 396 Catholic maintained.

We have heard about the lack of opportunities for newly qualified teachers. To increase their chance of employment, therefore, graduates will wish to be able to apply to 100% of primary schools. However, to teach in a Catholic maintained primary or nursery school, teachers must have a Catholic certificate in religious education. There are only three options for Northern Ireland students who want to obtain that certificate.

First, St Mary's students are advised by the college about the requirement and can opt to take the certificate only if they are doing the four-year degree course there. Protestant students are not likely to study at St Mary's for one year, let alone four years. Therefore, that provision is simply not suitable for Protestant students. Secondly, the primary PGCE course at the University of Ulster includes integrated study for the religious certificate, which students receive on graduating from the course. However, again, there is no provision for simply taking the certificate by itself. Other students are left with one option: they must take a part-time, distance learning course from the University of Glasgow, which last for 24 months and costs £480. From 2012-13, the fee is set to increase to £800.

We have a system, therefore, in which Protestant primary-school teachers coming out of university are seriously disadvantaged in two ways. First, those who lack the certificate have significantly reduced chances of employment in the country as a whole, because they will not be considered for employment by Catholic maintained primary schools. I have already outlined the difficulties with obtaining the certificate, so, secondly, as Protestant schools also consider and employ Catholic applicants —

Mr Wells: I am sure that the honourable Member had a slip of the tongue, but there are no Protestant schools in Northern Ireland; there are state schools, which are open. I went to a state grammar school where a third of the boys were Roman Catholic. Similarly, a high proportion of students at Stranmillis are from the Roman Catholic tradition and are very welcome at it.

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

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention; I assure him that it was a slip of the tongue. I take his point fully on board.

The fundamental inequality in our education system must be remedied. All those who graduate as teachers should be able to work across Northern Ireland, irrespective of religious barriers. We have heard many statistics about unemployed newly qualified teachers, and it genuinely angers me that Protestant teachers have another hurdle to overcome. I shall give an example from my constituency. Recently, a lady came to me with concerns about her son, who trained to be a teacher at Stranmillis College. Due to the difficulties that I outlined, the young man in question is now taking a job in the Middle East. Surely that is not a cost-effective solution for dealing with our young people.

The Minister must answer two fundamental questions. First, will there be equality in teaching across all sectors — in other words, freedom for all? Secondly, if not, will we commit to joint or shared education across the board? In this new era of peace and reconciliation, we simply cannot have a state within a state. It is imperative that we level the playing field. Consequently, I strongly advocate that we begin to properly consider a truly integrated education system. The DUP is a vocal and proactive supporter of integrated education. In my opinion, we need to amplify the debate. The First Minister has already said on record that he believes that future generations will find it difficult to believe that separation in education based on faith ever existed. I sincerely hope that we can work together to make that a reality. If the people on this side of the House are serious about moving forward, I urge them to go back to their communities and ensure that this inequality is dealt with once and for all.

Mr Byrne: I congratulate Mr Craig for tabling the motion. It represents the pain among young teachers who cannot get work. We all agree that young teachers who have been trained face a terrible situation. They are innocent victims of what I call a systems failure. It is important that the Department of Education really starts to listen to the pain that is being experienced.

Young teachers cannot get permanent teaching jobs; they cannot even get temporary or part-time teaching posts. Indeed, they do not even get a chance to do a probationary period of teaching after they qualify. That is a great

handicap for many of those young people. As Michaela Boyle said, many of them experience deep demoralisation. They are the victims of a vicious circle. As Lord Morrow said, they cannot even get shortlisted for jobs because they do not meet the experience criteria, which is demoralising and grossly unfair to those young people.

Young people who embark on teacher training have made a career choice that they want to pursue. They have stayed on in school, done their A levels, decided to do a three- or four-year teacher training course and have come out with £15,000 to £20,000 of debt for a student loan. When they cannot get a teaching job, they feel cheated and badly let down by the system. Many of them cannot get a start in their careers even in temporary work as substitute teachers in schools. Unfortunately, there is an abuse of the system. Many retired teachers are continually hired in schools in obvious preference to young newly trained teachers. That is where the system is grossly unfair.

Mr B McCrea: I know the point that the Member is trying to make. I did not get a chance to say it during my speech, but the PAC report states:

"We acknowledge that prematurely retired teachers account for only 13 per cent of substitution days".

Therefore, it is only 13%.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute in which to speak.

Mr P Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The Member misquoted the PAC. The quote is actually from an Audit Office report.

Mr B McCrea: I acknowledge the correction, but the information is still relevant.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Byrne has the Floor.

Mr Byrne: I accept Mr McCrea's point. However, if you talk to young teachers who cannot get a job, that issue comes up all the time. Many principals, when they need a substitute teacher, ring up a former teacher. They ring up somebody who has experience, so the situation perpetuates itself. If we are not going to give young teachers a chance to get started, they will never be able to get into the system. That is the human tragedy of the situation.

In many cases, young teachers are being overlooked for temporary posts while teachers are on maternity leave or long-term sickness. As I said, many school principals are taking the easy way out. I have friends who are retired teachers, and I say to them that they are keeping young people out of a job. We have to face up to that, and I call on the Department of Education to face up to the issue. Some guidelines have been issued, but they are being ignored. I accept the fact that if a teacher of A-level maths, science or another specialist subject goes off on sickness or maternity leave, a principal will very often want to hire an experienced teacher to carry on and finish the A-level course in the interests of the students. However, that is not always the case. Some principals take the easy way out and quite simply hire retired teachers to make life easier for themselves.

In 2008-09, we could have saved £6 million if newly qualified teachers had been hired to provide cover instead of prematurely retired teachers. That would be a start to addressing the issues that we are talking about. We need to restrict the use of retired teachers for substitution, and we need a one-year post-degree job placement scheme for young teachers. There are costs, but the current human costs are greater.

We should attempt to introduce the Scottish model here. If a young qualified teacher could get a one-year probationary period within the first two years of graduating, they would at least have some sense of hope. I urge the Minister to try to listen to the case that many Members have made.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate. I will clarify the figures; it appears that every time I respond to a debate, I have to clarify figures. Mr Craig said that 5.6% of newly qualified staff receive full-time permanent employment, and that figure is accurate. However, the Department uses figures that include newly qualified teachers who are on long-term contracts and who are covering for long-term leave, and those figures are recognised by the General Teaching Council. Technically, both figures are correct, which is often the case when you are dealing with figures and arguments.

At the outset, I add my voice to Mr McElduff's comments about the late Frank Bunting. It is

appropriate that, in the first education debate of the new term, we recognise his contribution.

There is no doubt that newly qualified teachers face difficulties in gaining full-time employment. In the current economic circumstances, many people face difficulties in obtaining employment, particularly in their recognised field. However, the Department of Education has not been sitting on its hands since the previous debate or, indeed, during the previous mandate when my predecessor, Catriona Ruane, was in office. As my speech progresses, I will outline several initiatives that have been taken and which are beginning to have an effect on several issues that Members have raised.

However, all of that must be constructed within the law. When we call upon prematurely retired teachers not to re-enter the system, we have to remember that being older is not against the law. When I look around the Chamber, I see a bit of grey hair, including my own. If we follow the analysis of some Members, people with grey hair and who are over a certain age should all retire and move on and allow younger politicians to move in. That is the challenge that we are putting out. *[Interruption.]* Do not tempt me.

Lord Morrow: The Minister is very good at taking things and changing them around. I recognise that he has a few grey hairs and that I have less hair than I used to have. The point that was being made was about people picking up their redundancy today and re-entering the system next Monday morning.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes; although we jest, it is a serious matter. My predecessor and I have taken action on prematurely retired teachers. However, I caution against some of the language that is being used today. Is a highly qualified base of young people who are not currently employed as teachers a "waste", as one Member said? Are we in a "crisis", as Mr McDevitt said? That needs further analysis. We are certainly not in "groundhog day", as Michelle McIlveen suggested. Miss McIlveen informed the House that she is a qualified teacher and taught in the profession, but she is now a very capable MLA. Do we refer to Miss McIlveen as an "unemployed teacher"? Where do we draw the line in describing people who have gone through the colleges?

As we debate the issues, it is important that we are realistic. In not only the teaching profession but in many walks of life, there is increasing

competition for jobs. All of the initial teaching qualification courses that are offered here are heavily oversubscribed, and Mr McCrea also referred to that. The fact that there are up to eight times more applications than there are places is an indication of the strength of demand and the quality of the young people who want to enter the teaching profession. It is also an indication of the quality of those who go on to teach in our schools.

The situation is not down to poor careers advice. Those young people, who are highly qualified when they leave post-primary school, have made a conscious decision. Knowing the risks and the obstacles to full-time employment, they have decided that they want to go into higher education through our teaching universities, because they realise that going through a teaching degree also qualifies them for a broader marketplace.

The primary task of our teacher training colleges is to provide teachers for our schools. However, young people who are looking at their career options, particularly in the current economic climate, are asking themselves, "What qualifications can I achieve to give me a broader appeal to the employment market?"

4.15 pm

I am keen to remove the obstacles to employment, and I am keen that any obstacles to cross-border mobility are addressed. Indeed, Ms Boyle referred to that subject.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I am keen for that to happen so that teachers here can also avail themselves of employment opportunities in the South. Indeed, I will attend a North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting tomorrow where the work of the teacher qualifications working group will be discussed. That group continues to build on the progress that has been made to date on the mutual recognition of teaching qualifications and on the easing of other teacher educational-related barriers.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member will give me a moment, I will.

Although we should, rightly, provide opportunities for people who aspire to be teachers to enter initial teacher education courses, we must

carefully manage their expectations. Given the highly qualified nature of our young people who are seeking to enter our teaching courses, the careers advice that is now available to them, and, indeed, given the media and political attention on the high numbers of unemployed qualified teachers, I have no doubt that young people are assessing their options before entering our training colleges.

Mr Wells: The Minister described himself as an unemployed cook, but he has probably done rather better than he expected. I am a Member whose mother, wife and two daughters are teachers. The Minister has not indicated whether he will stop schools demanding that, before someone can apply for a full-time teaching job, they must have six months' full-time experience. That is a major obstacle. Very few other employers do that, yet 89% or 90% of adverts in the job pages in the local newspapers deliberately put up that false barrier to teachers.

Mr O'Dowd: I will address that as I go through my speech.

I referred to the figures and to how we assess the number of teachers currently in employment. Those statistics do not necessarily mean that those who are unsuccessful in gaining a teaching post are currently unemployed or, indeed, currently seeking a teaching post here. Figures obtained from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for June 2011 show that 17 claimants under the age of 30 who sought a teaching occupation were unemployed for more than 26 weeks. There were 113 claimants under the age of 30 whose occupation sought was teaching, and they were unemployed for less than 26 weeks.

It is important to ensure that the numbers who join approved initial training for education courses reflect the needs of our schools system both in the short and long term and then present value for money. We must also ensure that we have in place a system that supports an overall viable and vibrant teacher training sector that meets the needs of our pluralist education system. The direct matching of teacher supply with demand is complex, given that the number and types of vacancies that occur in any one year are influenced by a number of factors but principally by the decisions that schools take on the desired size of their teaching complements and the designation of teaching posts as full-time or part-time.

I will deal with the Member's point. At the behest of Assembly, the autonomy on employment matters rests with the board of governors of each school. That has been one of the sticking points during the ESA discussions. I, as Minister, cannot direct a school on the criteria under which a person is employed and nor can the Department of Education, the boards or Council for Catholic Maintained Schools. As long as the criteria are legal and boards of governors act within employment law, they can set certain criteria. We have requested clarification from a number of employing authorities on how they have presented a number of further attributes to employment. However, six-month qualifications are, in my opinion, a matter that fits within current employment legislation, but I am willing to be corrected on that.

As Mr McCrea said, my Department determines on an annual basis the intake levels of courses of initial teacher education having carefully considered the overall forecast demand for teachers based on a range of statistical information. That includes outputs from the operation of the teacher demands statistical model and takes account of pupil numbers, teaching employment, teacher migration and teacher vacancies.

To a large extent, newly qualified teachers are unable to find permanent posts due to falling rolls. Pupil numbers have declined from almost 341,000 in 2003-04 to almost 322,000 in 2010-11. But they are projected to rise, as Mr McNarry indicated, by 2016-17. Although pupil numbers are an important factor in determining the intake, many others also need to be taken into account. It is also necessary to forecast the need for teachers in specific priority or shortage areas, including, for example, STEM-related disciplines, Irish medium, modern languages and early years. My Department carries out an annual survey of schools to gauge vacancies in those areas.

Overall, the provision made available at individual institutions is aimed at meeting the differing needs of our schools system and ensuring that appropriate routes are made available. Although the North of Ireland needs a similar number of teachers, it does not necessarily mean that they can be trained at a single institution. Therefore, I am conscious of the need to maintain and develop the capacity of local IT providers to educate teachers to meet

the diverse needs of our pluralist education system.

That brings me to the question that was raised by Mr McCrea. His history of events over the past years was potted, but, how and ever, he got to the core of the issue. We have two teacher-training colleges. Both are very fine institutions. If we continue to drill down below a certain number, one or other of those colleges will no longer be viable. We have to ask ourselves a question: as an Assembly that wishes to assist in working our way out of the economic downturn, do we want to start closing down institutions of further and higher education where young people can achieve a quality education with widely recognised qualifications?

I wonder whether some people looking in on the debate will be saying that the Assembly is complaining that we have too many highly qualified young people. That is the other side of the argument. It has been proven around the world that the sustainable way to work our way out of economic recession is to have a highly qualified base of young people. We can close down one or other of our institutions, but I go back to the figures that I commented on earlier: there is still a high demand from young people to go into the teaching profession. Yes, they want to go into schools and carry out their vocation, but they also see it as a pathway to other courses and employment. We can close one of our institutions and ship our young people over to England, Scotland or Wales, or down South; however, we have to ask ourselves a serious question about planning for the future. I am of the view that the way forward is with our current teacher-training institutions. That allows us to build out of recession.

Mr B McCrea: I appreciate the Minister giving way. The issue is not that we are worried about having highly qualified young people; it is that we are worried about having highly qualified unemployed young people with no prospect of employment. I am quite happy for people to say to me that we think that, in the longer term, there will be a role for those people. That is fair enough. However, the other issue is that careers advice relates not just to teachers: we produce too many lawyers and other professionals.

Mr O'Dowd: I appreciate what the Member said, but I have to get on to look at the way we have dealt with the issues surrounding the motion. Ruairí Quinn sent out a circular, and I

know that the Chair of the Education Committee loves circulars, but, as Mr McDevitt requested, my Department has already sent out guidance to schools on the employment of newly or prematurely retired teachers. Our recent changes to the common funding formula will ensure that schools will meet the cost of that. I understand that members of the Education Committee are seeking to challenge that decision because they see it as a burden on schools. You cannot have it both ways. The only way that we can change the attitudes in schools is by legislation, and, as I said, we cannot discriminate in law, or by taxation through the common funding formula that will allow those schools to work out —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I am stuck for time, Chair.

We are working through it in that way. As I said, we have ensured through the circular that schools are monitored on how they employ staff. I encourage any Member who is also on a board of governors to use their influence on substitute teacher matters to insist that the boards adhere to the departmental guidance and give a chance to newly qualified teachers.

I am aware of the report in Scotland and that a year's induction work is provided there for newly qualified teachers. That has been costed. It would cost the Executive £20 million a year. It is currently being reviewed by the Scottish Executive. I have asked my officials to monitor the situation very closely and to report back to me on the findings of the report and the Scottish Executive. If favourable recommendations come out of the report, I assure you that I will bring them to the attention of the Education Committee —

The Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: — and, more importantly, to the Executive and the Department of Finance and Personnel to fund any opportunity to ensure that our newly qualified teachers are given a chance in life.

The Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mervyn Storey, the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Mr Storey: I preface my remarks by concurring with the comments made about the sad passing of Frank Bunting. We have passed on our

sympathies to his family. Education will miss not having someone as colourful as Frank was in the way in which he carried out his business.

I congratulate my colleagues in securing the debate. As we bring it to a conclusion, it is right and proper to pass comment on what the Minister outlined. He referred to the figures. Even though he qualified it by saying that my colleague was “technically” correct, the reality is that the figures speak for themselves: 13·74% down to 10·71%, down to 5·6%. Remember that, when the Department does its calculations, it does not always take into account the total graduate number. It takes into account only the number of graduates who have registered with the General Teaching Council. We could spend all day going back and forward on figures. However, the stark reality for at least 95% of qualified teachers out there is that they do not have a place of employment.

I refer to a point that seemed to exercise Mr McElduff and another Member on the opposite side of the House with regard to the number of Roman Catholic teachers who were employed as a result of attending St Mary's. I do not believe that ‘The Irish News’ is in any way associated with the unionist community, albeit it is a paper that is exceptionally good for educational coverage. However, in 2008, it stated:

“Fewer than 40 of 800 graduate teachers got jobs in Catholic schools last year ... Figures show that a relatively small number of graduates secured employment in the Catholic sector and most were only awarded temporary contracts.”

I rest my case with regard to ‘The Irish News’.

The Minister said that the Department has not been sitting on its hands. However, it took the Minister 13 minutes to get to the point where he started to tell us what it has done. Then he told us that what it has done is to make changes to the common funding formula. He referred to the fact that some of us have raised concerns about those changes. Here is the reason why we raised those concerns. Item (e) says:

“to remove the criteria for centre substitution costs of the common funding formula where teachers have been required to be involved in the transfer procedure”.

Unfortunately, old habits die hard. The previous Minister —

Mr O'Dowd: Let me correct the Member. I am not referring to the transfer meeting. I am referring to how schools will fund any substitute teachers that come in. I have made changes to that. Any school that brings in a retired teacher will have to pay the higher rate to that retired teacher out of its own costs, not out of the central Department costs, which means that the onus is on the school and not on the Department. That will affect the employment of substitute teachers more effectively than anything.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for that. However, it is regrettable that in this document it was used as another means of trying to have a go at the failed issue of transfer, which, no doubt, we will come back to at some stage.

I appreciate that the Minister is here, given his demanding schedule over the next number of weeks. I trust that his diary commitments and his position will in no way deflect away from the serious issues that we have to address in education.

I have a specific question for the Minister. He said that he is keen to remove the obstacles to employment. He referred to the six-month experience mentioned by my colleague Mr Wells, but he did not mention the Catholic certificate, which was referred to by my colleague Mr McIlveen.

When the former deputy First Minister Mr McGuinness was asked about it in the House in relation to the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, he called it discrimination. The then deputy First Minister said that it was a "sensitive issue". If we are going to have a shared future and a level playing field in employment, we are going to have to look at discrimination against teachers who cannot apply for a job in a sector other than the maintained sector.

4.30 pm

The Education Minister then came to the closing down of institutions, and he was trying to defend the issue around St Mary's. That was raised by Basil McCrea, and I hope that I will get to it in a minute or two. He has said to me that you cannot have it both ways in relation to the funding and employment arrangements, but you cannot have it both ways and have rationalisation in education provision in the estate, but not have it in teacher training

provision. If we are going to have an open, honest and transparent debate about the future of our education system, it has to go from preschool and early years right through, and it will have to include the issue of the many places in which the PGCE primary programme is provided. It is provided in more than two institutions. Remember that the University of Ulster provides a PGCE primary programme, as does the Open University. There are, therefore, more than two institutions here with that provision.

Let us ensure that we look at the issue in the round, and let us not have any institutions that believe that the Members on that side of the House or the Members on this side will, somehow, give them a blank cheque to provide for their continued existence. We need to watch that very carefully in the weeks ahead.

I turn now to Members' comments. My colleague Mr Craig raised the issue of the cost of substitute teachers. I was never very good at maths at school, and I stand to be corrected on my calculations, which are based on the figures that have been given and which were quoted by Mr McCrea as well. We should be amazed that between 2001 and 2009, the cost of substitute teachers increased by 73% to £66 million. Previously, it was somewhere in the region of £33 million or £34 million. We have had a massive increase.

Then the Minister comes to us today and says that the introduction of a scheme would cost £20 million. He said that in the statement that he issued before the debate took place. The issuing of that statement shows that the Department was obviously exercised about the debate. It would be a lot cheaper to implement the scheme than to continue with the funding of substitute teacher provision. I took another look at the statement issued by the Department; in fact, I put my spectacles on to make sure that I read it right. This morning, in anticipation of today's debate, the Department said that it has taken a number of measures to increase employment opportunities for newly qualified teachers. It went on to say that one of those measures was to reduce the overall intake to initial teacher training courses by almost 25%.

The problem goes back to the issue that was raised by Mr McDevitt. He talked about management crisis. Here we have a Department that tells us that it has control of the issues.

It can fill the Education Committee and the Chamber with all the information, week on week. We appreciate the hard work that many in the Department do to provide us with that information. However, the Public Accounts Committee at the House of Commons did not hold the view that the Department had control of the issues. In the follow-up report on the management of substitution cover for teachers in the 2010-11 session, it stated that:

"The Committee is disappointed that the Department, employing authorities and schools have still to realise the full benefits of a £1.1 million investment in a new management information system — Resourcelink, the implementation of which had already taken considerably longer than first anticipated."

I ask the Minister or his officials to take note of that, and maybe, at some stage, they can actually inform us of the outcome and benefit of this wonderful system, about which we still have two Members across the House disputing the accuracy of figures.

At one stage, I thought that Mr McKay was the Minister. I thought that I had missed something.

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

Mr Storey: He was defending the Department. He did, I have to say, say that it is wrong for teachers to have to get by on a week-to-week basis. It is not right for us in this House or any Department to have to deal with that.

I will conclude by reminding Mr McCrea that it was his colleague Mr Empey who did the deal with former Minister Caitríona Ruane on the intake numbers at St Mary's. If he wants to have a discussion about the figures, he should talk to Mr Empey, who will give him the facts.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Just to clarify, I did call Mr Storey as the Chair of the Education Committee. I now acknowledge that he is speaking in his capacity as a private Member.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of newly qualified teachers leaving full-time study without employment, or with little prospect of it; and calls on the Minister of Education, in conjunction with the Minister for Employment and Learning, to address the situation.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Before you bring the matter to Adjournment, I want to make sure that my correction is noted. As was pointed out by Mr Maskey, in the earlier debate, I quoted from the paper produced by the Northern Ireland Audit Office on 26 May 2010, 'The Management of Substitution Cover for Teachers: Follow-up Report'. For the record, that was corrected by Mr Maskey, and I want to make sure that that is noted.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is not really a point of order, but you have put it on the record.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Schools: Hollywood

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who are called to speak will have six minutes.

Mr Dunne: I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Hollywood and Redburn Primary Schools.

I am grateful for the opportunity to propose the Adjournment topic today. I am glad that the Minister and Dr Farry are in the Chamber. They are both welcome, and I appreciate their giving their time to listen to the debate.

The issue of new school buildings in Hollywood has been ongoing for many years. There is widespread feeling within the community, and they long to see some degree of clarity and assurance around the future of schools in Hollywood.

There is genuine concern from all levels regarding the future of the four schools concerned. It is vital that those schools get some indication of their future in order for them to maintain their quality of education as they plan for the future.

The fact that the combined current enrolment of those schools is almost 1,000 pupils is testament to the importance of those schools in their communities. That is highlighted by the reality that they span all three levels of education, affecting children from the age of three to the age of 18, the latter being school leavers seeking to take the next step in their lives.

Hollywood has four schools that are in poor condition: Hollywood and Redburn Primary Schools; Priory Integrated College; and Hollywood Nursery School. All those buildings are well over 50 years old. Each school operates in substandard conditions, with poor heating and lighting and outdated facilities. At present, none of the schools has any outdoor

sports facilities; such a basic provision has been denied them.

The Department of Education identified some years ago the need to do something about the fact that two primary schools in one town are both undersubscribed, faced with similar challenges and having to operate in basic facilities. Combining the schools makes good economic sense, and the provision of a new building will result in significant savings in running costs. Various options for sites were examined, and the Priory Integrated College site was identified as the best location for a newbuild of the combined primary school. That is the proposal progressed by the board to date.

Priory Integrated College is a popular facility with 509 pupils enrolled for this academic year; they come from north Down, east Belfast, Strangford and beyond. The Department of Education set the enrolment at 450 pupils, and that has been exceeded. The college continues to broaden educational experiences for its students, and it shares study facilities with its neighbour, Sullivan Upper grammar school. Priory College is in a very poor condition, and the proposal is to provide a purpose-built new facility at the site of Redburn Primary School. That is sorely needed to replace the second-rate building in which the young people are educated. Such is the condition of the roof that a major repair must be made this year at a cost of £750,000, as there is regular ingress of water through the roof, which puts at risk the health and safety of pupils and staff.

Recently, I was contacted by a parent whose daughter had started P1 at Hollywood Primary School, having been told that the building was unfit for purpose and that the new school would be built. That pupil has now moved to Priory College, is in year 9 and is likely to spend the rest of her school career in the old buildings, which, her parents had been told, were substandard.

The need for proper nursery provision in Hollywood is also recognised by the Department, and there is a proposal to build a new nursery school on the site of the existing Hollywood Primary School. One part of that site would be required, and the remainder could be sold for housing in what is a prime residential location.

The people of Hollywood and beyond have waited many years for the new project; a lot of preparation has gone into it. There is much

merit in the proposal, not least given the success and the high standards that all those schools have attained over the years. The four schools involved have already been through extensive design and procurement processes, including consultation with all stakeholders and interested parties. The planning process has progressed, again with extensive consultation, and, since last year, planning permission has been in place for the build of the three new schools. The proposal was to start the build programme last spring, and the project was to run as a single contract, with the building of the three schools to proceed in three phases.

I urge the Minister to provide funding for the three new schools project in Holywood, end the long-running dilemma of children being educated in substandard buildings and provide those children with modern, fit-for-purpose facilities to meet the requirements of the twenty-first century.

Mr Cree: I am pleased to be here to support my colleagues. People are used to representatives from Holywood complaining about how badly they are done by, but I must say that, in this particular case, those representatives are 100% right.

Mr Dunne outlined the project and I underscore that. As a part of that project, moneys will be generated from the sale of sites that will be redundant.

The scheme is innovative and presents a holistic solution to education in Holywood; however, it is another déjà-vu experience. We have been here before. I dug out my file to have a look at it. On 13 November 2007, we had an Adjournment debate on Priory Integrated College, Holywood.

We had another debate in March 2010. In July 2010, the Department of Education revealed its new school building plan, and we were delighted to see that Priory Integrated College was part of that plan. However, the then Minister advised that there was no guarantee that those schools would be built, because there was not enough money. Extra funding was required.

4.45 pm

In January 2011, the then Minister announced that, as part of her Department's budget for 2011-12 to 2014-15, the Holywood project would not go ahead. She had taken the unusual

step of transferring budget capital to revenue to cover the Department's operating expenses. Since then — again, Gordon Dunne mentioned this — we have faced the spectre of high maintenance costs for the schools, particularly for Priory College, which is a classic case of what happens when plans for replacement buildings are deferred.

I believe that a new roof is required, and I was a bit shocked to learn that a figure of £700,000 was quoted. That is only the start of the repairs, and common sense dictates that, although capital resources have been diverted to revenue to meet ongoing operational costs, those operational costs by way of maintenance are now proving to be absolutely unacceptable. Surely it must make more sense to “recapitalise” the revenue costs that are being spent on maintenance and do the job right. I support the project and urge that we get on with it as quickly as possible, because it will be money saved in the end.

Dr Farry: I wish to clarify that I speak as a Back-Bench Member. I also declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Priory Integrated College. First, I congratulate Gordon Dunne for securing the Adjournment debate. We will put down to the youthful enthusiasm of a new Member the pursuit of a path that has been well beaten, with at least two separate Adjournment debates on the topic having taken place previously, one of which I tabled.

Mr Weir: With the best will in the world to the Member, I am not sure how much youth is involved in this, as he seems to be of a similar age to the buildings about which he is complaining. I can, however, testify to the enthusiasm.

Dr Farry: Indeed. He is not as old as he looks, by the way.

I sparked a debate back in 2007, and it was one that Peter Weir sparked again in 2010. Gordon Dunne set out well the context to all this and the urgency in proceeding with the scheme. Indeed, Leslie Cree spoke about some of the more recent history. However, it is worth stressing that the scheme has seen two false dawns, and, in that respect, the announcements that were made in the past and then cancelled have certainly added to the very strong sense of frustration in Holywood, the wider north Down community and, indeed, east Belfast.

It is worth referencing the fact that the issue goes back as far as March 2006, when the then direct rule Minister with responsibility for education, Angela Smith, announced that £8.7 million would be available for the redevelopment of the schools in Holywood. The project was put on hold shortly thereafter as a result of the Bain review, which, in turn, led to the sustainable schools policy from the Department of Education. Of course, the irony is that, having been put on hold, the actual review strengthened the case for redevelopment in Holywood, because it was a model of best practice for the Department's evolving policy. However, in some respects, the review knocked the thing back and, in some ways, proved fatal to the scheme's progression.

Shortly after the Bain review was announced, the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) confirmed that it believed that the project was viable and that it reflected the best practice set out in the review. The current Minister's predecessor, Caitríona Ruane, visited the school in, I think, June 2007, and she clearly was impressed by the need to go ahead with the scheme, so much so that she announced its go-ahead once again in February 2008.

However, that proved to be a false dawn, and we are now into the more recent history that Leslie Cree set out. I also want to stress at this stage that what is happening in Holywood is potentially a very good news story in respect of how we should look at education in the future.

I recognise the need for rationalisation of the school estate in Northern Ireland. We have too many school buildings. We need to focus more on direct services for pupils, and what is happening here will facilitate that. First of all, we have Priory College, which is an integrated school, and Holywood Primary School, Redburn Primary School and Holywood Nursery School all have very diverse intakes. They are maximising their appeal to the community. I believe that integrated schools are the most viable financially, economically, socially and educationally.

Priory College is oversubscribed. It is right at its limit in respect of places, and people are being turned away from it. The irony is that the Department caps the number of pupils in Priory College, and there is clearly unmet demand

for that school in the area, which proves the viability of moving ahead with the scheme.

It is also worth stressing again that, at secondary level, Priory is very much embedded in the community. It is part and parcel of the wider learning partnerships that are evolving in the north Down area. It has good links with the community and the wider business sector. Therefore, it is very much a model of best practice in those aspects of evolving educational policy. Indeed, there is potential for work to be carried out with North Down Borough Council over shared sporting facilities. That is another potential example of joined-up government that we have not yet captured because we have been unable to move ahead with this project.

In conclusion, it is worth reflecting on the importance of the project to the community. There is overwhelming support for it not only in Holywood but much wider afield. The schools, particularly the secondary school, have a very wide catchment area, but they are not sucking demand from other schools. Indeed, the integrated schools in the wider vicinity — Strangford College and Lagan College — are oversubscribed. Therefore, there is clearly unmet demand in that area that we are not capturing.

We need to rationalise the school estate for the future. The scheme is very much in line with where we should be going and where the Department wants to go, and I urge the Minister to listen very clearly to what Members have said and to take it forward at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Easton: I welcome the opportunity to once again speak on this important matter involving education in my constituency of North Down. This is the third time that we have had an Adjournment debate on the issue, and it is possible that we could have another three debates on it before we get it resolved.

The proposal to build a new 450-place post-primary school at the Redburn site, to demolish the old Priory College building and to construct a new 21-classroom primary school at the Priory College site, as well as a new nursery school at the Holywood Primary School site, is considered the best way to ensure the necessary educational provision for pupils currently attending controlled provision in Holywood and for those likely to attend in the future. Therefore, it is recommended for acceptance.

As far back as March 2006, the then Education Minister Angela Smith announced a £380 million investment for school building programmes. Contained in that announcement was the acceptance of the proposal that this debate is about. The proposal was somehow subject to review in accordance with the Bain report. Nevertheless, in March 2007, the then Education Minister, Maria Eagle, stated:

"I would like the remaining assessments for the schemes on hold completed with the relevant authorities within the next two months to see whether there is a strong case for the schemes to proceed."

At the end of March 2007, the SEELB asked the Department of Education for clarification on what additional information it required in order to allow the delayed projects to be released. In May 2007, the Department responded to the South Eastern Education and Library Board raising concerns over the number of pupils attending Priory college. Later in May the board responded, and the Department accepted that the project met all the criteria set out in the Bain report. However, in September 2007, the Department raised yet more concerns regarding the religious balance of the school, whether parents supported the move to the Redburn site and how developments at other schools would impact on Priory college.

The board responded in the same month. The Minister acknowledged that the school was below the threshold determined by Bain but stated that if the school was providing a high standard of service the threshold did not necessarily have to be met.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Given the slightly bizarre situation created when the numbers at Priory were artificially capped below the Bain threshold, does the Member agree that that made it impossible, on the face of it, for the school to prove that it could meet the Bain threshold and that the fact that the college is having to turn people away proves that it is more than capable of meeting that threshold?

Mr Easton: Yes, I totally accept that; it is a very good point. On a visit to the school in May 2007, at my request, the Minister said that she was impressed by the good work of the principal and the staff, as well as the evidence of commitment to the delivery of high educational attainment. She added that she hoped that a decision would be made on the application

as soon as possible but said that she did not have the development plans for the school in front of her. The board, however, said that the Department had sufficient information in its possession to make a decision. Five years later, we are still waiting.

The question that comes immediately to mind is where did the money go for that plan, which was announced by the then Education Minister, Ms Smith, back in 2006. The delay is completely unacceptable. I therefore call on the Minister to act on this, to provide clarification on the matter and to announce a start date as soon as possible.

Mr Weir: When you are the fifth Member from a constituency to speak in an Adjournment debate, there is great difficulty in finding anything novel or fresh to say, particularly when, as has been indicated, it is the third opportunity that Members have had to debate the issue in the Assembly. I will, however, endeavour not to fall into that trap. I have a certain sympathy for Mr Agnew, who has to follow this.

Members referred to the earlier debates on the issue and to the fact that this is the third occasion on which it has been debated in the Assembly. That is a signal of how seriously Members are taking the issue and of the determination of Members from across the political spectrum in north Down to push ahead with the project. It is also a signal to the Minister, whoever may hold that office, and the Department that people will simply not give up on this, because it is felt to be of benefit to the people, particularly those in Hollywood.

As indicated, we have a situation in the Hollywood education system. One of the key points is that the issue affects a wide spectrum, from those of preschool age to teenagers. We have first-rate students, teachers and education, but children are unfortunately operating in third- and fourth-rate classrooms and schools. It is high time that we dealt with that structural issue. The scheme is very innovative. There has been a lot of talk about the various problems, and I think that everyone will acknowledge the problems facing the education system. The proposal is novel because, as I think Stephen Farry indicated, it very much embraces the way forward in the future. It goes beyond one age group and one section of education, because it includes the integrated sector at Priory, two primary schools and a nursery school. It

is, to use a phrase that was used already, a holistic solution to the problems of education in Holywood. In many ways, the frustrating thing is that, because this is like some form of jigsaw whereby all the pieces need to be put in place for it to succeed, the overall project requires a degree of advance.

My colleague Alex Easton and others indicated the concern about artificial barriers being put in place. Indeed, the numbers have sometimes been questioned. All those barriers have been overcome, but there has been this unusual situation where the college has suffered at times because of the cap. I am sure that all my colleagues have been inundated over various summers, when the secondary school intake is happening, by parents who have not been able to get their children into Priory because there is simply not a place. There is a concern that there is a high level of pressure on school places in north Down as a whole.

The opportunity for a new school would help to alleviate that, and, indeed, the removal of the cap would alleviate that.

5.00 pm

Mr Cree: The Member, quite rightly, refers to his frustration about that project. He touches on the fact that all the secondary schools in north Down are fully booked. Many north Down residents have to go further afield to get a place, possibly even as far away as Newtownabbey, as has been suggested. That is crazy. The situation is similar in the primary sector. Does the Member agree with that?

Mr Weir: I agree completely. There is particular pressure on the secondary sector. That is why the scheme is needed. In that regard, north Down tends to differ from most other areas. As the proposer of the topic for debate indicated, at primary level, with regard to ongoing spend, there is spare capacity in Holywood Primary School and Redburn Primary School. We are told constantly about the number of school places that are available. I think that everyone would acknowledge the problem. This is an opportunity to bring those two schools together, and it is a very sensible solution.

Although we appreciate that there are pressures on the capital budget, clearly, in the long run, it would make economic sense for the project to go ahead. That would make more economic sense than to simply carry on trying

desperately to patch up existing schools. If we were, quite frankly, left in the situation of not making the most efficient use of two undersubscribed primary schools that would make one very strong primary school, we would simply be throwing away money fairly constantly. It also makes broader sense where surplus land is concerned, because there is real need for housing in Holywood. It could bring in revenue and could help to alleviate some social problems, such as housing pressures. Therefore, it is an all-round win-win solution.

Reassessment is needed. I suspect that the Minister will tell us about the financial pressures that exist. I am sure that we all accept that. However, the matter should be given a degree of priority and certainty. Re-examination of the capital budget is needed. Perhaps a certain amount of money is at times wasted on maintenance that could be directed towards capital. It has been indicated that the Minister's predecessor, unfortunately, moved in the opposite direction. Due to the pressures that were imposed from across the water, most Departments and Ministers shifted towards trying to move money from resources into capital because that was where there was the biggest gap. Unfortunately, the Department of Education moved in the opposite direction.

No special favours are being sought for Holywood. The people of Holywood are simply looking for reasonable facilities and to be treated with equality and equity. I urge the Minister to give that greater priority and to move ahead so that the four-school scheme, which everyone can embrace and which will benefit not only Holywood but the education system of Northern Ireland, can finally be realised.

Mr Storey: Members might wonder why I have stayed to take part in a debate that does not particularly relate to my constituency. The general topic is important to me, not only as Chairperson of the Committee for Education but as a Member of the House, and I speak now as a private Member. I commend my colleague, who has grey hair and less of it — I refer to comments that were made in the previous debate — for securing the Adjournment debate.

This is a serious issue for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that we have gone round the issue of capital projects time and time again. I was just looking through some old papers, and I noted that, when the previous

Minister of Education came to the House on 29 June 2010 to discuss the review of capital projects, which I will come to in a minute or two, the now deputy First Minister and Minister of Education said, referring to my behaviour:

“That reflects badly not only on him but on the Committee. I assure the House that if the Chairperson of a Committee from my party were to behave like that, they would no longer be a Chairperson”. — [Official Report, Bound Volume 54, p81, col 1].

That is probably why he is now Minister of Education. However, I will not behave badly today. I thank the Minister for the way in which he has engaged over the past number of weeks on a variety of issues. He has created a better environment and atmosphere for us to have difficult discussions and make difficult decisions.

I want to focus on the issue of capital projects, which impinges on the issues in Mr Dunne’s constituency and the schools to which we referred — namely, Priory Integrated College and Hollywood Primary School. The Department published the investment delivery plan. The difficulty that was created when that investment delivery plan (IDP) for schools and youth services was brought into the public domain was that every school in the plan thought that the day had dawned and that the Department had eventually — through planning, foresight, knowledge and engagement with all the sectors and all schools — come up with a comprehensive road map that would at some stage bring about the delivery of its particular project. For example, Priory Integrated College was classified as a design and build category B project. The estimated completion date for that was 2011-12. The Hollywood Primary School project was due to be completed in 2012-13 and was also a design and build. Here we come to the problem with the investment delivery plan. The previous Minister decided that she would review capital projects, which she said would give us clarity on the issue. She said:

“the Department will be producing very clear criteria for capital projects, and, at the appropriate time, I will provide those criteria to the Committee.”

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We have to keep to the subject of the Adjournment debate.

Mr Storey: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker. To date, we have not seen clear criteria. That is why Priory Integrated College and Hollywood

Primary School would like to know where they are in relation to the overall plan. Where are they in relation to the capital projects? The previous Minister categorised the projects. Are they compliant, partially compliant or non-compliant?

I am aware that the Minister will make a statement to the House later this month. He is aware of my concerns, particularly around the controlled sector and, for Mr Farry’s information, the integrated sector, which I raised in correspondence with the Minister. Those sectors are a reality of our school estate.

In moving to make decisions, I want to say publicly and on record in the House that it will be a retrograde step if any sector is given or is seen to be given priority over another. There must be equity and fairness, so that, when schools such as Hollywood Primary School and Priory Integrated College and their boards of governors look at the decisions that have been made, they can say that they understand the rationale, understand the decision that was made and do not feel left out because someone else has taken the money to do the project.

I commend the Member who secured the debate and wish him well in getting further progress on the issue.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy — I mean, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Apologies; I am trying to work out my own title. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Uasal Dunne as an diospóireacht a thabhairt chun tosaigh inniu.

I thank Mr Dunne for securing this debate on the proposed capital build project for Hollywood, as it affords me an opportunity to address Members’ concerns about the progress of the newbuilds for Priory Integrated College, Hollywood and Redburn primary schools and Hollywood Nursery School. Today’s debate allows me to highlight the significant challenges and very tough decisions that my Department faces in light of the reduced capital allocation. I recognise the difficult conditions that the principal, staff and pupils at Priory Integrated College, Hollywood Primary School, Redburn Primary School and Hollywood Nursery School currently have to endure. Unfortunately, the Hollywood schools, as Members will be aware, are not unique in that respect.

Cloisim a bhfuil le rá ag daoine inniu agus iad buartha faoi na ceithre scoil in Ard Mhic Nasca. Tuigim an difríocht mhór a dhéanann scoil nua ar bith do na páistí, do na múinteoirí agus don phobal ar fad.

I hear the concerns expressed today about the four schools in Holywood, and I am acutely aware that the building of any new school makes a significant difference not only to the children but to the teachers and wider community. As Minister of Education, I aim to put the best interests of children and young people at the centre of my considerations. They deserve to be educated in comfortable, safe, modern schools. However, the education budget and the Executive Budget highlight significant reductions in the capital resources for education over the next four years.

The IDP list, referred to by the Member opposite, was published a number of years ago. I accept his analysis that it sent out a clear signal to the listed schools and created a high expectation that, as the Member put it, the dawn had come. The new budgetary reality means that I have difficult decisions to make. I currently have 52 projects, including those on the IDP list, and about 100 other schools that have since applied for rebuilds. I am considering how to make best use of the scarce resources available to me for capital investment in the education sector. To support an area-based approach to planning and a sustainable schools policy, I will seek to establish the robust criteria that the Member called for. No decisions have been made at this time, so it is not possible to advise when or if any specific project will go ahead.

My Department's key priorities are to raise standards for all and to close the gap in performance between the highest and lowest achievers. The delivery of high-quality education is dependent on a network of successful and viable schools. In view of the significant reduction to the capital allocation for education, the current pattern of school provision cannot be sustained. Mr Farry referred to the school estate: in the absence of significant reshaping, resources will be spread ever more thinly over too many schools. Over the next few years, schools' budgets will come under increasing pressure, with deficits increasing in many schools.

I must ensure that we develop a planning and investment process that supports sustainable schools. I need to ensure that any available

capital funds are deployed on a strategic and prioritised basis to address the most pressing needs across the school estate. My Department's sustainable schools policy aims to achieve the network of schools that we need. However, we need to increase the pace at which we implement it. There is a clear need to reshape provision so that the limited resources available are distributed over fewer, larger schools that are sustainable for the longer term. We need to move to a smaller number of sustainable schools delivering a broad and balanced curriculum that supports children, society and the economy.

I have no doubt that the circumstances and scenarios of the individual projects that Members presented to me today are factual. However, I am not in a position today to indicate whether those projects will or will not go ahead. I have informed the Speaker's Office — I believe that the Committee for Education has also been informed — that I will make a comprehensive statement to the Assembly next week. In that, I will set out in clear detail the future direction across a wide range of educational issues, including the capital build programme, the sustainable schools policy and how we work within the limited financial resources currently available.

I want to be able to work in a planned way towards year 4 of the education budget. If we do not take the necessary decisions, we will be in crisis mode by year 3 or 4 of the budget, and I have no wish or intention to lead the Department of Education or any school in that direction.

I regret that I am not able to give Members a firm commitment on their projects today. However, I can assure them that, following next Monday's statement, a clear pathway will be laid out and that managing authorities, boards of governors and so on will be informed of the way ahead. I accept that he was speaking as a private Member in this debate, but, as the Chairperson of the Education Committee called for, a clear pathway for the future will be set out for all schools from that point onwards.

Adjourned at 5.15 pm.



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