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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 2 October 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Education Bill: First Stage

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I beg to introduce the Education Bill [NIA 14/11-15], which is a Bill to provide for the establishment and functions of the Education and Skills Authority; to make further provision about education, educational services and youth services; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Judicial Appointments Commission

Mr Principal Deputy 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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I advise Members that, in accordance with schedule 6 to the Northern Ireland Act 2009, the motion must be passed by parallel consent.

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): I beg to move

That, pursuant to paragraph 2 of schedule 6 to the Northern Ireland Act 2009, sub-paragraph (1) of that paragraph is not to apply.

Nearly four years ago, in November 2008, the deputy First Minister and I announced that we had reached a joint view on a number of matters concerning the future devolution of policing and justice. That was an important milestone on the route to the successful devolution of those responsibilities in May 2010. Among the matters on which we reached agreement was the process for judicial appointments and removals. The Westminster legislation, passed in 2002 in anticipation of the future devolution of justice, would have given power to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make appointments following recommendations from the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission (NIJAC). The deputy First Minister and I agreed in 2008 that that should not be the case and that the Judicial Appointments Commission should itself exercise the powers of appointment that would otherwise have come to us.

As with other aspects of our November 2008 agreement, the arrangements on judicial appointments were to be reviewed in the light of experience before May 2012 and would be subject to a sunset clause. Westminster legislation enacted the changes that had been agreed in the Northern Ireland Act 2009,

removing the First Minister and deputy First Minister from the process of judicial appointments and removals and placing a statutory responsibility on an Assembly Committee to review the new arrangements before May 2012. A sunset clause was to become operative automatically in May 2012, preventing us from jointly appointing new members to the Judicial Appointments Commission, but it could be disapplied by an Assembly motion or overriding legislation.

The new arrangements came into operation in April 2010 with the devolution of policing and justice. The Assembly's Justice Committee took on the task of reviewing the operation of the new arrangements for judicial appointments and removals. In April this year, the Justice Committee reported that the new arrangements, although only in place for a relatively short period, since April 2010, appeared to be working satisfactorily and recommended that there be no changes to the current process at this time. The Committee's report was debated in the Assembly on 14 May and endorsed. The Assembly should, therefore, have no difficulty supporting this motion, which will disapply the sunset clause in paragraph 2(1) of schedule 6 to the Northern Ireland Act 2009:

"From 1 May 2012, no new members may be appointed to the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission, unless the Northern Ireland Assembly resolves that this sub-paragraph is not to apply (or an Act of the Assembly overrides the sub-paragraph)."

Paragraph 2(2) requires that the motion be passed by parallel consent provisions, and paragraph 2(3) makes it clear that a resolution can be passed after 1 May 2012.

The deputy First Minister and I jointly tabled the motion because our Department, OFMDFM, has sponsorship responsibilities for NIJAC and funds the commission to the tune of £1.4 million annually. NIJAC is an effective and efficiently run arm's-length body that carries out its functions independently of government. It decides whom to appoint or recommend for appointment and is committed to appointing the best possible judicial office holders through fair, open and transparent selection and appointment processes. It appoints applicants and recommends them for appointment solely on the basis of merit.

In the past financial year, the commission made 32 recommendations for judicial appointment, comprising seven court appointments, 25

tribunal appointments and 54 recommendations for renewal of appointments. The commission is headed ex officio by the Lord Chief Justice. It has 12 other members, five of whom are judicial members from various tiers of the judiciary who are nominated by the Lord Chief Justice. Two legal professional members are nominated by the Bar Council and the Law Society. The remaining five lay members are appointed jointly by the deputy First Minister and me. All appointments of NIJAC members are regulated by the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

The sunset clause, which came into operation on 1 May, has not affected the judiciary, nor has it prevented the commission from carrying out its functions. However, we hope soon to fill three vacancies for lay members that arose in the course of the summer. If we are to do so, the sunset clause needs to be disapplied. This is the purpose of the motion. Though couched in quite technical terms, it essentially restores to the deputy First Minister and me the authority to appoint new members of the commission. As the arrangements for judicial appointments and removals that came into operation in April 2010 have operated effectively, been reviewed by the Justice Committee and endorsed by the Assembly, it is appropriate that the sunset clause be disapplied by virtue of the motion. Accordingly, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak to the motion today as Chairman of the Committee. In accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 2009 and Assembly Standing Order 49A, the Committee for Justice undertook a review of the operation of the amendments made to the judicial appointments and removals processes by schedules 2 to 5 to the Northern Ireland Act 2009 earlier this year.

When undertaking the review, the Committee considered a range of issues, including the fact that full responsibility for judicial appointments now sits with the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission; whether the balance of power in that process had moved too far towards the judiciary and unelected bodies and away from politicians; and the perception reflected in evidence received by the Committee but refuted by the chairman of NIJAC, the Lord Chief Justice, that the commission was dominated by its judicial members. Having considered the evidence received and noting the views expressed by NIJAC and the Department of Justice, as indicated earlier by the First Minister, that, while they had been in place for only a relatively short time, the arrangements created by the 2009 Act

appeared to be working satisfactorily, the Committee for Justice recommended that there be no changes to the current process for judicial appointments and removals in Northern Ireland at this time. The Committee also indicated that it intended to undertake a further review of the judicial appointments and removals process in due course.

The report that the Committee completed was fully debated in the House. I could elaborate on all the discussions that took place when we looked at the issue, but I am confined to speaking about this power, which will allow the appointment of lay members to the Judicial Appointments Commission. So, on that basis, I support the motion.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Principal Deputy Speaker. Beidh Sinn Féin ag tacú leis an rún seo. As the Chair outlined, this came before the Committee, and we had a number of evidence sessions on it. As the Chair also said, concerns were raised, particularly on the profile and balance of the commission. In our evidence sessions, we were given the details of that balance, which the commission felt was appropriate at present and did not hinder it from doing its job.

This is a technical motion, if you like, that allows the process to go forward. The arrangements have been in place for only a very short time, and the Committee has committed itself to returning to the issue and to doing a further review. The First Minister outlined the detail of the proposal, which will move the overall process forward, and Sinn Féin will support it.

Mr Elliott: I suppose we are in an unusual position in that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have tabled the motion, but the Justice Committee appears to have carried out most of the work on the review and report. I recall that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) was to have a role at one stage as well. However, it has all come together now. I listened to the First Minister, and I appreciate that this is a non-controversial aspect of the process.

From the report, I recall the Lord Chief Justice giving, at least, some indication that the fact that a number of judges and legal people were on NIJAC did not mean that it was just judges appointing judges. I suppose that he was trying to give some comfort to Committee members and, indeed, to the House, but I think that some members still had concerns about that. That is why the Committee was keen to have more laypeople involved to allow them to have their

say so that there could be no view — perceived or otherwise — that it was just judges appointing judges. I know that the Committee is keen to have a much wider review at some stage, and I support that. There needs to be an opportunity for time to look at this. I have no difficulty agreeing to the motion at the moment, but it is important that, over the next period of time and, in fact, during this Assembly mandate, we have a more in-depth review of the appointment process. We should also look at it when the Justice Committee's time is not constrained as it was during this stage, which happened because we needed to make sure that we got this through so that appointments could be made. I support the motion, but I will put down the caveat that we need a wider review in the near future.

10.45 am

Mr A Maginness: First, we support the motion. It is a technical motion that provides a necessary power to OFMDFM, and we believe that it is right that it be made. I concur with the remarks of the First Minister and those of the Chair of the Justice Committee, who chaired the report on NIJAC. He made some interesting points, brief as they were. The important thing, as Mr Elliott said, is that the Justice Committee will reconsider NIJAC's role and look more carefully at how it functions.

We were constrained by the time limits imposed on the Committee. We were doing work subcontracted from the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, but we carried out our work well. However, there are issues that need to be examined further. Paragraph 109 of the Committee's report, which the Chair referred to, states:

"The Committee discussed the question of whether the balance of power in relation to the process for judicial appointments and removals has moved too far towards the judiciary and non-elected bodies and away from politicians. In any further consideration of where power should reside in relation to judicial appointments and to what extent, if any, political representatives should have a role, a distinction should be made between involvement in the selection process and involvement in the appointment process."

As I said, there is further work to be done. The Justice Committee will return to it at some time, and that we fully support.

Mr Allister: It is clear that the 2009 legislation was and is a significant improvement on the

arrangements pertaining to judicial appointments that existed in the 2002 Act and, indeed, the 2004 Act. The primary benefit that flows from the 2009 Act is the extent to which it depoliticised appointments.

The appointment of judges is never an easy matter. Historically, of course, it was done exclusively, I suppose that one could say, by existing judges themselves. That may have created difficulties with transparency. It may not have resulted in the wrong people being appointed, and I suppose that those who watch other practitioners in operation in their courts, from where our judges come, are almost best placed to determine who may or may not be a good judge. For many years, that effectively was the system. It operated almost on a tap-on-the-shoulder basis. That was not, I suppose, something that recommended itself to the wider public. Therefore, the introduction of the Judicial Appointments Commission brings some transparency. Whether it brings a better outcome is perhaps debatable, because then it gets beset with all sorts of political correctness with regard to gender balance and all sorts of things. Whether the appointments are as persuasively on the basis of merit may be a matter for debate, but this certainly has the appearance of a better process.

My one continuing difficulty with the 2009 Act is that it bestows the power of appointment for the lay members not on the obvious Department — the Department of Justice — but on OFMDFM. Therefore, there is the abiding concern that the opportunity remains for them-and-us appointments.

Schedule 6 to the 2009 Act states that, once this motion is passed, appointments can be made from tomorrow — the day following. In the winding-up speech, therefore, I would like to hear when the appointments will be made. In fact, have the people already been chosen, and will we have an announcement as soon as tomorrow of those appointments? Can the House have some information on that? Can we have the assurance that, unlike the appointments to the Maze regeneration board, these appointments will show none of the telltale signs of cronyism and will be persuasive, stand in their own right and be beyond dispute as regards the suitability of those who will be appointed?

Mr P Robinson: There is little doubt that the arrangements for judicial appointments and removals that were initially agreed by the deputy First Minister and me back in November 2008, were legislated for in Westminster in 2009 and became operative in 2010 have

worked satisfactorily. I welcome the remarks made by the Chairman of the Justice Committee. I am a wee bit puzzled by the remarks of Mr Elliott. I do not know whether I should be offended that he did not really want me to move the motion. He complains when we do not come to the House, and he complains when we do. We are moving the motion because we have the sponsorship of NIJAC and we fund its work.

Mr Elliott: Will the First Minister give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will indeed, if he is going to say something nice.

Mr Elliott: If that were reciprocated, I might, but the chances of that are probably limited. I am sure that the First Minister will appreciate and Hansard will record that all that I indicated was that it was unusual, in the sense that OFMDFM was the sponsor body — I recognise and understand why — but the Justice Committee brought through the report. I just said that it was an unusual situation at that time.

Mr P Robinson: The Member should not be surprised if I say something nice, now that we are on the train to unionist unity; I would have thought that he would expect it. As I said, it is because we are the sponsoring department.

I note the remarks of Mr Alban Maginness about reviewing the issue again. It is proper that we all do that and continue to monitor the operation of NIJAC. The conclusion of the review carried out by the Justice Committee, which reported in April this year and was endorsed by the Assembly in its debate on the Committee's report back on 14 May, was supportive of continuing on the basis outlined. One of the reasons why the arrangements work effectively is, of course, the central role of the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission in the selection and appointment of judicial office holders. The current system has removed from the process any involvement by Northern Ireland Ministers or politicians in the selection and appointment of judicial office holders. It is appropriate that the arrangements should continue and that the sunset clause, which has temporarily prevented the deputy First Minister and I from refreshing the membership of the commission, should be disapplied. That is the purpose of the motion. I say to the Member for North Antrim that we hope to be able to make appointments very quickly.

The Judicial Appointments Commission operates on the basis of its values of

independence, merit, diversity, fairness, transparency, accountability and partnership. Its membership reflects a balance of judicial, legal and lay interests that was prescribed in the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. In appointing lay members, the deputy First Minister and I must, as far as possible, secure that they are representative of the community.

Mr McCartney reflected concerns raised during the Committee hearings about some aspects of the outcome of the judicial appointments process. In particular, I think, he is referring to the dearth of female judicial office holders at the highest ranks of the judiciary. Of course, Northern Ireland is not unique in that respect; the issue has also attracted the interest of Westminster legislators in relation to England and Wales. NIJAC has a statutory responsibility to ensure, as far as is reasonably practicable, that a range of persons reflective of the community is available for consideration in selecting judicial office holders. That, of course, is without prejudice to selection on merit. It pursues an outreach action programme that includes promoting and encouraging with the legal profession applicants for judicial office. A joint liaison committee comprising NIJAC, the Law Society and the Bar Council will examine the reasons that hinder talented women in the legal profession from progressing to partner level, to QC and the higher judicial tiers. NIJAC also looks forward to the outcome of current research by Queen's University on the real and perceived obstacles experienced, in particular by women, in applying for and securing judicial appointment. That issue, I am sure, will continue to engage NIJAC, the Justice Committee and the Assembly.

I noted, of course, the late arrival of the Member for North Antrim and leader of the TUV, who is clearly getting mixed up between Eastern Standard Time and Central Standard Time, using his Rory McIlroy watch. It is a pleasure to hear from him. He has made previous contributions on the issues of policing and justice. He told us that, as soon as policing and justice powers were devolved, the stars would fall from the heavens and the mountains would crumble into the sea. Now, in this debate, we have just a slight whimper from him.

The Member, of course, had to refer to the Maze appointments. It is interesting that someone who has repeatedly complained about the lack of unionist appointments to various bodies is now complaining about unionist appointments being made to bodies. He seems to think that, if you have a political outlook and support a political party, you are, therefore, not

experienced in anything else and should not be appointed to important bodies. I do not take that view. Of course, the Member also told us that Martin McGuinness would be appointing High Court judges and would be in control of the judiciary —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Robinson: I will give way to him before I start reading his documents.

Mr Allister: I cannot enter the same caveat as was placed on Mr Elliott about what I might say. Will the First Minister agree — I am sure he will not agree, but he knows it in his heart — that, had it not been for the issues I raised, the 2009 changes would never have been made? He was embarrassed into making those changes, because, under the 2002 and 2004 arrangements, Mr McGuinness would have had appointment and removal powers with Mr Robinson. It was because I raised my voice that those changes were forced to be made. The First Minister will not admit that, but he knows it to be true in his heart.

Mr P Robinson: The Member has an inflated view of his influence and power. The legislation that was on the statute books when we came into power was presented to us by Westminster; it was not our legislation. The matters that we have in the present arrangements had been on the table for discussion before he even knew we were discussing those matters. It had absolutely nothing to do with any views expressed by him. I recall writing to him on a number of issues and pointing out just how wrong he was in some of the conclusions he was reaching. Of course, he put out a lot of literature indicating:

"How McGuinness would get control of the Judiciary" .

I have to say that the deputy First Minister was not seeking control of the judiciary. He does not have control of the judiciary. This legislation makes it very clear that NIJAC is the group that will determine who the judges will be. The Lord Chief Justice chairs that group, and the majority of the members of that group are directly appointed by the Lord Chief Justice and the Bar Council. The Member knows well the composition of that group.

Only five of the, I think, 13 members of NIJAC are appointed by the deputy First Minister and me on a joint basis, and there was never going to be any situation in which any one person would have control of the judiciary. That was

just part of the scare tactics that the Member has been attempting to flood the community with. Once again he has failed, and, once again, he is having to humbly come before the House and withdraw all the remarks he previously made about the deputy First Minister taking control of these matters. The public outside will see that, once again, his scaremongering amounts to nothing.

I am very pleased to ask the Assembly to endorse the role outlined by the Justice Committee and endorsed previously by the Assembly. I commend the motion and urge the House to resolve accordingly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the House that the motion must be passed by parallel consent. In other words, I must clearly hear Ayes from all sides of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, pursuant to paragraph 2 of schedule 6 to the Northern Ireland Act 2009, sub-paragraph (1) of that paragraph is not to apply.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that parallel consent has been demonstrated.

11.00 am

Private Members' Business

Business: Exports and Finance

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. 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 who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Cochrane: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the recent action taken by the European Central Bank and the US Federal Reserve to help stabilise the global economy and the opportunities that this presents for Northern Ireland companies to expand and to increase exports; recognises the continuing problems of small and medium-sized enterprises accessing bank lending; further notes the availability of several significant sources of business finance; and calls on the Executive to use their influence to ensure that businesses are connected efficiently to these funding sources and that their use is maximised.

Barely a media day passes when the condition of our local economy is not lamented; the regional outlook for growth not reassessed; or provincial access to finance and lending not critiqued. I feel it is important that, as an Assembly, we give this issue our focus and discuss how our Executive can use their influence for the better.

I have no doubt that most Members will have had first-hand experience with local business people facing financial challenges and development hurdles in the current economic climate. We are aware of the diminishing availability of borrowing, particularly to small and medium-sized businesses that fulfill such a crucial role in our local economy, accounting as they do for 89% of the total number of businesses and employing 67% of the workforce.

In establishing a global context for the motion, however, I invite Members for a moment to turn their focus away from the familiarity of the local context and instead take a fresh look at recent developments in Europe and the United States. My referring to these actions does not mean that I am complacent about the current state of difficulties. I am not saying that we are in

recovery yet, but these actions definitely help to stabilise things. We must, therefore, contemplate how Northern Ireland might capitalise on new signs of stability in these markets. The motion seeks to create a positive context about companies expanding and exporting and being facilitated in doing so through finance flowing to businesses.

Members will be familiar with the euro zone crisis that has been bridling for some considerable time. However, some might not be so well versed on the recent positive strides that have been made by the European Central Bank (ECB). Following its governing council meeting on 6 September, the bank announced a programme of outright monetary transactions (OMTs); a bond-buying scheme designed to build on and complement the previous securities markets programme (SMP). Much the same as the SMP initiative in simple terms, the ECB will continue to buy up Government bonds in the secondary market — in other words, from investors — rather than directly from Governments. That will help to contain the public borrowing costs of those countries. The result of such proposals from the ECB is genuinely helping to create a growing sense of optimism within the euro zone, alleviating fears regarding not only investment interests but business interests.

In the past few weeks in the United States, the US Federal Reserve has announced new measures underpinned by its third round of quantitative easing, or QE3. Quantitative easing works through a number of channels to stimulate the economy, such as by maintaining low borrowing costs for households and business. At the same time, the Federal Reserve has made an enduring commitment to keep national interest rates at exceptionally low levels until mid-2015 at least. These actions represent a statement of intent from the US Federal Reserve that, for the first time, it is linking its actions with what happens to employment rather than to prices. Reading between the lines of the recent announcement, it would appear that America is willing to tolerate an elevated level of inflation in order to bring about a fall in unemployment and a return to strong growth. Although the US approach arguably employs different techniques and practices, its overall end goal is fairly in tune with what is evidenced in Europe. The priority for both is stability.

Geographically, culturally and politically, we may be somewhat removed from the situations unfolding in both the US and the euro zone. However, in light of those developments, we can and should be focusing on the potential

opportunities. Economic stability and business opportunity go hand in hand, and regardless of our size, history or politics, we must, as a society, actively seek to take advantage of this renewed economic horizon.

In Northern Ireland, we have a range of established SMEs with boundless potential, but that potential and enthusiasm is not always matched by financial backing. Yes, we have a small population, but that should not confine our growth or our long-term objectives. Provided the European and US measures are effectively adhered to, any success in increasing employment and confidence and restoring growth will bring with it a subsequent increase in private demand and a rise in the demand for overseas exports.

The points that I am making today are consistent with the Executive's economic strategy, which sets out a vision for an economy in which a growing number of firms compete in global markets. The strategy emphasises the need for deepening our export base, focusing on areas with the greatest potential for growth, such as agrifood and ICT, and targeting developing and fast-growing economies as destinations for our products and services.

Although such a vision outlining the way forward is essential, the key to any progress will be the measurable finance available to nurture and grow our private sector from the bottom up. Therefore, I seek to highlight exactly where our Executive can use their influence to ensure that our Northern Ireland businesses are connected efficiently to finance sources and that their use is maximised.

The efforts of Invest NI in that regard, with the access to finance strategy, go some way to filling in the blanks for the next five years at least. In recognition of the growing difficulties for SMEs in obtaining bank loans and the decreasing availability of grant funding, Invest NI plans to offer business funding of between £1,000 and £2 million. Offered through five separate funds totalling more than £100 million, the focus of each fund and the level of support will vary according to need. The Northern Ireland Spin Out funds, for example, are targeted at start-up and early-stage businesses, with awards of between £50,000 and £250,000, while Co-Fund Northern Ireland is designed to co-invest in SMEs along with business angels and private investors to the tune of between £250,000 and £450,000.

The most significant fund in relation to the motion and the desire to deliver progress in our

export market, however, is the growth loan fund. It is managed by WhiteRock Capital Partners and has been established to lend up to £50 million to Northern Ireland firms over the next five years, using funds from Invest NI and the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC).

Just last week, we began to see the positive impact of that funding stream, with the first approved investment from the fund being awarded to Brookvent, the Dunmurry ventilation systems manufacturer. The fund, which lends between £50,000 and £500,000, requires companies to be based in Northern Ireland, demonstrate growth potential and generally be in the manufacturing, engineering or tradable services sectors, benchmarks that are all clearly evidenced by Brookvent.

This local firm, which employs 49 people, has recently opened offices in Poland and in Vilnius in Lithuania to look after Baltic markets. It is anticipated that the growth loan investment of £425,000 will help to accelerate Brookvent's growth strategy in overseas markets and research and development.

Further statistics for the growth loan fund reveal that, since its creation, there have been 112 loan enquiries with six additional deals due to complete in the next few weeks, ranging in value from £100,000 to £500,000 and totalling £2 million, including the Brookvent award.

In a time when so much negativity and finger pointing is focused on limited bank lending, it is prudent that we should be exploring and, indeed, promoting alternative lending options such as venture capital and debt financing to help to rebalance and rebuild our economy and to drive private sector growth.

Bank lending is certainly essential to small business sustainability, and the proposed £1 billion business bank along with the funding for lending scheme are not without their merits. However, we cannot overlook the limits of our political clout, and although we can scrutinise and make recommendations for banking practices, our capacity to enforce our will on banks is limited.

Other means of financial assistance such as the growth loan fund represent a greater opportunity for the Assembly to have an impact and must surely be given the appropriate backing if they are to meet their aims of boosting business confidence and helping local companies to realise their growth potential.

As stated previously, the growth loan fund was originally designed to lend £10 million a year over five years. However, it is now thought, based on current demand, that up to £15 million a year could be reasonably awarded through the scheme. I am aware that Invest NI has been informed of this need. As Members, we can use our influence on the issue. I realise that, for some, however, the worry is that businesses will not be connected to this opportunity and that we could see more unused funds being returned at the end of another year.

It is evidently clear that the demand for this fund, and undoubtedly others, is significant. Yet, alarmingly, many local businesses seeking developmental funding are not aware of the schemes.

This is not a criticism of Invest NI, but there appears to be a disconnect between the fund provider and the fund recipients. Even as a Member, I often struggle to connect businesses in my constituency to the most appropriate group. Therefore, what is perhaps needed is a funding-focused intermediary organisation. Such a body could operate as a separate, independent and non-political co-ordination point that businesses could turn to. It could ask the questions and match the funding with true corporate finance expertise, perhaps even with a specialist funding arm. I do not believe that this body would need to be complex, but it would need to be well advertised.

There is also a problem with higher-level lending of between £2 million and £10 million. I would be interested to know whether there are Executive proposals to deal with that issue. Positive steps are being taken, but there is clearly more work to be done to open global markets and connect to funding sources. On those grounds, I call on the Executive to use their influence and faculty to explore suitable alternatives to ensure that businesses are connected efficiently to these funding sources and that their use is maximised.

Mr Newton: In supporting the motion, I pay tribute to the Minister for her recognition of the problem, particularly in SMEs, and for her initiatives and willingness to look beyond the current banking structures and examine ways in which small businesses might access non-bank sources to stimulate their activity and market. If I am critical of the motion in any way, it is because it fails to recognise that the problem has already been identified and some initiatives undertaken.

In the general thrust of things, we, within the structures of the Assembly and Departments,

need to match the innovation being shown by many SMEs, which are exporting in new and imaginative ways. We need to look at ways in which we can support them, including through finance. As well as what are regarded as the traditional methods, there are other opportunities to be explored. I pay tribute to Invest Northern Ireland for its willingness to explore those opportunities, which include crowd funding and expanding our base of angel investors.

We live in a generally conservative business environment in Northern Ireland. In many ways, companies have traditionally been reluctant to give up some control through the purchase of, or investment in, equity. However, in today's modern economy, that is perhaps one of the most effective ways of securing finance. It also has the added benefit of bringing professional expertise to bear in businesses. I meet many businesspeople, as, I am sure, do all MLAs, and I appeal to them to take advantage of the many support and information programmes that are available through the Department and Invest Northern Ireland to assist local SMEs.

Having spoken to those regarded as expert in the field, I believe that our range of support for SMEs is amongst the most comprehensive. Of course, there are particular things that we would like to see and things that we would like to see done better or more extensively. However, as the domestic market shows no signs of any significant growth, at least not in the immediate future, our focus must continue to be on assisting and supporting local companies and helping them to get their products overseas.

I firmly believe that, although we need to ensure that businesses are aware of all the possible sources of finance, we must also ensure that they are not borrowing for the sake of it. Instead, we must ensure that their plans for growth are matched against their borrowing and development so that they utilise that finance properly. I believe that all the support mechanisms are in place to ensure that that is the case.

11.15 am

I welcome many of the recent bank interventions, although there is still a long way to go. In today's market, businesses are right to be cautious in their planning. TV coverage of the Prime Minister's visit to Brazil only last week highlighted the attempts by Brazil and the UK to build trade agreements. That is a welcome step, as is the fact that our Minister is taking

similar steps. I am encouraged by the steps that the Minister is taking and by her efforts —

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

Mr Newton: — to support our SMEs on a global basis.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: My time is up.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank those who tabled the motion.

It is clear that, regardless of the interpretation of the banks' behaviour, there is unity of opinion across the House on how they have behaved. They are certainly stifling, if not suffocating, many business through their actions. As the Member who spoke previously said, it is important that we look at all the other sources of finance that can be made available to our local businesses, especially the small, medium and micro-sized ones.

I was looking at the Boosting Business website, which contains a sentence that sums the situation up quite aptly. It says:

"It's harder than ever to get a bank loan or funding to invest in business development or business growth."

When you look at certain trends in emigration and employment etc, you will see that there is concern that ambitious young people, as well as old people, who are the next generation of entrepreneurs are coming up against a brick wall. Whenever they have those sorts of experiences, it is little wonder that they are looking to the likes of Australia and the United States and saying, "If I can't get anywhere here, maybe I will go somewhere else." Maybe in a few years' time we will see the outworking of that in that people from Ireland will have gone to other shores and had business success there. It is a big concern that the current situation could dovetail into a brain drain, particularly of our young talent.

The motion calls on the Executive to increase awareness of what is available and to ensure take-up of start-ups for microbusinesses and small and medium-sized enterprises. The Executive and both Ministers, the Finance Minister and the Enterprise Minister, are limited in what they can do, but I think that it is important that they do all that they can to

influence the banks in particular and to put in place funding structures for businesses.

Reference was made to quantitative easing, which has been put in place in different jurisdictions in response to the economic difficulties. However, that is no guarantee that money will be injected into business communities, and, indeed, it has been shown that quantitative easing is no guarantee of that. Although banks are getting greater liquidity, the extra money is not going into businesses. Instead, the banks are improving their balances, so the benefits and purpose of those economic policies are not being realised, which is most unfortunate.

The funding for lending scheme is welcome. It has been shaped to try to ensure that there is some incentive for banks to lend. I look forward to local banks buying in to that scheme. Perhaps, if she knows, the Minister can confirm how many banks have bought in to that scheme or indicated that they are going to sign up to it.

It is quite clear that the politics of austerity are failing, whether in Britain, Ireland or Europe. When the current British Government, particularly the Tories, came into power, they had a long list of economists behind them to support their politics and the economic imprint that they were going to bring to government. We now find that they no longer have those economists behind them, because they need to invest to bring some form of growth to the economy here and in Britain. It is to be welcomed that that thinking is starting to have influence, and hopefully we will see some positive signs from the British Government in recognising that we need more money to get the local economy's wheels in motion again.

The politics of austerity that have been pursued by the British Government and the British Chancellor have failed. We need to send a clear message to them that the politics of austerity do not suit here —

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

Mr McKay: — and will result only in greater hardship for our communities.

Mr Cree: Initially, I had some difficulty in interpreting the intent of the motion. It refers to the recent action by the Federal Reserve, but what was that action? The statement in 'The Economist' advised that the Federal Reserve had lowered its short-term interest rates to zero and undertaken multiple rounds of bond

purchases. That had no appreciable change on the economy, so the Federal Reserve decided on more of the same. It will buy \$40 billion worth of mortgage-backed securities a month and extend the period of short-term rates near zero until at least mid-2015. It will keep buying bonds until after the recovery is firmly established. Similarly, the European Central Bank agreed to bring its unlimited capacity to print money to bear on the euro crisis to buy peripheral country bonds. Both actions are aimed at altering expectations. I guess that that was the input from that.

However, in Northern Ireland, we need to provide jobs and create wealth and prosperity. Access to finance is a crucial part of that work, and there is no doubt that the actions of our banks have not helped the situation over time. We were told that meetings had been held with the banks and the British Bankers' Association and that targets for lending had been agreed. We now know that, over the past two years, the Government have introduced a number of initiatives that are designed to improve lending and liquidity in the United Kingdom banking system, which they hoped would improve the availability of finance and reduce the cost of credit. We now know that none of those initiatives has worked in Northern Ireland.

We are also aware that banking is a reserved matter, and it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that such initiatives and schemes are equally effective in all parts of the United Kingdom. We need more clarity and greater transparency from the banks. There is little doubt that the cost and conditions that are now attached to credit are restricting demand from business. Many companies have decided to reduce their debt levels and are delaying investment projects because of the uncertainty in the economy at this time.

The Government's funding for lending scheme has met with support from our four main banks, but we have to remember that three of those banks are based outside of the United Kingdom and so are not under obligation to operate the scheme. However, our Finance Minister has told us that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury has committed to monitoring the participation of the scheme in Northern Ireland. There is no doubt that there are long-standing gaps in finance, and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has recently created several new loan funds. That, in itself, deserves credit.

The establishment of a new government-backed business bank is good news and has

the potential to change things. Part of its role will be to rationalise, improve and potentially have powers to manage the large multi-billion-pound portfolio of support that the Government provide. That would complement the private sector lending that was recently announced. The final details are due this month.

We need a satisfactory resolution to corporation tax. The devolution of that tax could create 50,000 to 60,000 jobs for Northern Ireland. We need to increase exports and assist small and medium-sized businesses to enter the export market. We need to ensure that our young people have the education and skills to compete in the current environment, and we need to encourage savers to save. In short, we need to use every tool at our disposal to develop our economy and to ensure prosperity for the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo faoi chúrsaí eacnamaíochta. I am pleased to participate in the debate on financing our business sector.

Growing local businesses is essential in Northern Ireland, but unemployment has risen by 19,000 people in the three years between July 2009 and 2012. That is a shocking statistic and one that we need to address in every possible way. A total of 23.5% of our 18- to 24-year-olds — that is 24,000 young people — are unemployed. The action taken by the ECB and the US Federal Reserve demonstrates that the crisis still exists in the global economy, and that makes it more difficult, but not impossible, for Northern Ireland companies to expand and increase trade.

Many of the smaller businesses in Northern Ireland were viable before the downturn and will be viable in years ahead. We need to ensure that they remain viable at this time, and we need to mitigate the current hardship to benefit the long-term health of the economy and ensure the survival of those companies. The SMEs need to expand, and, if they are to do that, they need strong support from the Executive and Invest Northern Ireland, and it is welcome that the Executive are making further funds available for those smaller companies.

The motion is useful, and I thank those who brought it forward today. However, it fails to acknowledge any responsibility in the Executive for job losses. Indeed, that is a wider trend in the Executive and an attempt to shift responsibility for job creation elsewhere. The Executive must acknowledge their responsibility

in that respect, and perhaps the Minister will inform us on what progress has been made in reaching the targets set down in the Programme for Government.

It is very worrying that the Executive have no defined job creation or business finance strategies. We seem to add pieces on here and there as the need requires rather than plan ahead in a strategic fashion. It was also deeply worrying to hear Invest Northern Ireland display an attitude of resigned acceptance to the trend of jobs moving overseas. Invest NI should be sending a strong and confident message to Northern Ireland businesses and projecting a strong image of Northern Ireland overseas.

Mr Cree said that corporation tax has the potential to produce 50,000 to 60,000 new jobs. We need to keep pushing the British Government on that matter. Indeed, we need to go further. Other fiscal powers could be devolved to Northern Ireland, and we should establish a commission in the style of the Commission on Scottish Devolution to present to the London Government, on the basis of evidence, how such powers would provide the Executive with additional tools to encourage job creation, progressive taxation and the protection of the most vulnerable in our society.

11.30 am

The Executive refused adequately to fund the Northern Ireland Green New Deal Group. Its recommendations were estimated to have the potential to create up to 20,000 new jobs. I believe that that is regrettable. It is regrettable also that the Executive have failed to adequately progress proposals such as those outlined in the CBI, IOD, Chamber of Commerce and NIIRTA jobs plan.

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

Mr D Bradley: The SDLP has produced a very useful document entitled 'Partnership and Economic Recovery'. I commend that document to the Minister.

Mr Frew: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important issue for Northern Ireland. There is absolutely no doubt that the economy must be the most important thing that we discuss in the Chamber. Of that, I have no doubt. With the economy comes prosperity, and that brings wealth to our people. It is very important that the Executive and the Minister engage in that vein.

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

We have in our midst an economic strategy, within the year here. It is something that is tangible; it is not just a document. It is something that we must strive to complete. When I say "us" I mean the whole Assembly. This is the most important thing that faces our voters and constituents, and it is vitally important that each one of us — and each party in the Chamber — is dedicated to aiding the private sector grow more steadily than it has done.

Within the economic strategy we have ambitious targets for the performance of private sector exports. Over the next three years, we seek to grow the value of exports by some 20%. That is no mean feat, but it is one that should be in that document, and one we will strive to complete. That must be the centre of our ambitions. We need more of our firms in global markets. That is the long and short of it. Export, and export-led growth, is the one instrument that could well lead our Province out of recession.

I am very happy to announce that in north Antrim— and in Ballymena in particular — we are doing very well at the moment. I say that with some nervousness, because we all know how things can develop, but at the present we have great success and growth in Ballymena. We have tried to retain what we have, what we call the "big five": Michelin, JTI Gallagher, Wrightbus, Moy Park and Patton Group. They are major employers in the town. They bring employment not only to Ballymena, but to the whole of north Antrim and wider afield.

It is very important that the Executive and the Minister aid those firms. Some of them are global. The job losses at FG Wilson were referred to earlier. Sometimes, when firms go global, we lose control of our destiny. So it is very important that those companies are listened to and that they are aided as much as possible.

Incidentally, I congratulate Invest NI. I met with its officials yesterday in this Building. Invest NI has helped Wrightbus to develop its kits and to win a £41 million contract in Singapore. That is good news; that is strength, and it is what we have to believe in. I get down when I hear politicians talk negatively on the economy. We know where we are: no one knows that better than the business community. We can talk about it all we want, but we should be positive and we should talk about things that we can do to enhance the opportunities for business. We cannot lead business; business must lead itself.

However, we must make sure that the runway for business to take off is there and that it is smooth.

If we are going to be negative, we should look at the banks and at what they have done over the past number of years. I will give just one example of that. If we look at the farming industry, we can see that the meal companies that provide the meal for producers and farmers have had the rug pulled from under their feet. That means that they cannot afford to give the producers and farmers the time and space they need when it comes to credit. It means that those in the farming community must go to their banks, where they are not getting a very sympathetic ear. I must give credit to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, who have gone to speak to the banks and who have, even in this very Chamber, slammed the banks for some of their practices as regards aiding growth.

We are doing some good things. I must commend the Minister again on the growth loan fund, which has been successfully launched and is being rolled out.

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

Mr Frew: It will bring benefits to a lot of our companies in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Frew: I certainly support the motion, but I plead with our Members to be as positive as possible when it comes to the economy.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. It is critical that we have the time today to debate any opportunities for access to new finance or markets for our business community. It is unfortunate that we are having this debate today against the backdrop of another announcement about local job losses. I make particular reference to the 14 job losses in my constituency of Foyle today. I want to acknowledge the particular difficulties for those employees and their families at this juncture.

There is no doubt, as has been said, that there are particular underlying difficulties in our economy that need to be addressed; for example, the infrastructural deficit and corporation tax. Equally, there is no doubt that the current economic climate and associated factors have hit small and medium-sized

enterprises especially hard. We must aim to ensure that we sustain the businesses that are already there and offset any potential job losses. That will include creating new investment and opportunities and training people in the skills that they will need.

The economic downturn has impacted on the levels of foreign investment. I am aware that, in 2010, there were only seven foreign direct investment visits to my constituency of Foyle. Therefore, it is even more important that, in the current conditions, small and medium-sized businesses and social economy enterprises are given the resources that they need to sustain themselves in the short term and to develop and grow in the longer term.

Banks, too, have a corporate responsibility to ensure that lending and borrowing facilities are accessible and available to keep SMEs and social economy enterprises going. Considering that it is our money that is being used to bail out the banks, it is important they and other lending institutions are continually reminded of their responsibility to assist recovery.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. She gave a list of responsibilities. Does she agree that it is imperative that a childcare strategy and affordable childcare are in place to help people and entrepreneurs to get into business? As for the infrastructural deficit, does she not also agree that investment in Magee university would transform her own constituency of Foyle?

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Member for her intervention, and, yes, of course I agree. As the Member may be aware, I referenced skills enhancement, and part of the discussion on that is around training and childcare and providing decent and adequate childcare facilities. The Member will also be aware that the expansion at Magee university is a central plank of the regeneration plan for the city and the entire north-west.

There are a number of business start-ups, as Members have said. A lot of them are doing very good work, but the problem is that there is a lack of assistance or self-help programmes designed to offer long-term, easy, accessible and ongoing advice. I believe that, if such services were available, we might see an increase in business success.

I particularly note, as the proposer of the motion mentioned, the disconnect that there often is between a funding body and a recipient. I believe that our SME sector needs to be assisted in accessing the money that will be

available through new opportunities, particularly through new European funding streams and Horizon 2020. I urge the Minister to consider a technical assistance grant to allow our SMEs to access that much-needed funding.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. Given the global economic conditions in which we live, it is crucial that our local businesses are given every opportunity to access new markets and to maximise their access to finance.

Northern Ireland is made up mainly of a small number of large manufacturing and support businesses and many small to medium-sized enterprises, which form the backbone of our local economy. Their value should not be underestimated. It is vital that, in these difficult times, they are given as much support as possible in order to survive and be sustainable.

Given our geographical location and economic position, we are very reliant on our European export market, with nearly half of our £16 billion worth of exports going to the EU. Therefore, the ongoing instability and uncertainty in the euro zone will obviously have a knock-on effect for our local economy. It is, therefore, imperative that our businesses are given the opportunity to export beyond Europe and actively to look for and target new emerging markets.

The opening of a new in-market support office in Kurdistan in July this year, which was supported by our Minister, is a welcome development, and I trust that we will see similar openings elsewhere in the near future.

Sustaining and growing our private sector is the only realistic way to counter the downward economic turn. It is crucial that our existing businesses are supported and that new businesses are given every opportunity to start up.

Having spoken to several local businesspeople recently, I know that one of the issues they often flag up is the difficulty they encounter in trying to access funding. Access to finance is crucial for our economic recovery, and I feel that the red tape and bureaucracy that restricts access to finance makes things very difficult for some of our local firms that so desperately need financial assistance to survive. Invest NI initiatives, including the access to finance programme, are helping to boost business and allowing firms to access much-needed funding.

Recent data from the Ulster Bank showing figures from August reinforce the very

challenging situation we find ourselves in, with local private sector outputs and new business falling. The report also shows business activity in the private sector decreasing for the ninth month in succession.

Research and development has an important role to play, particularly in our local manufacturing industry. During the recent inquiry into R&D by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the four main barriers to company innovation that were identified were the availability of finance, the cost of finance, the perceived economic risk and the cost of innovation. We need to look at ways to improve access to this important work in order to help our SMEs to develop for the future. EU funding is vital for the development of R&D for our businesses to enable them to stay ahead of the game.

Recent evidence sessions during the inquiry showed that framework programme 7 has proved most difficult and much too demanding for small and even medium-sized businesses. The new Horizon 2020 programme in Europe must be more accessible for SMEs and larger businesses to enable them to get funding for R&D in order to develop new products and survive in the world market.

I know that a lot of hard work has been done to date by our Executive and our Minister in helping to improve our local business sector in these difficult times. I encourage them to continue with that work to ensure that our local businesses have the best possible support network in place as we seek to rebuild and rebalance our local economy. I support the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím chun tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún tábhachtach seo.

First, I echo the sentiments of Robin Newton. He spoke some time ago and positively praised the ongoing work of the Minister, her Department and Invest NI. He spent a good five minutes doing that, and two of his counterparts have since joined him. Perhaps that is an indication of the DUP operating more closely with the UUP — plenty of talking but not a pile of saying anything.

11.45 am

It is, however, good to hear an acknowledgement from the opposite Benches that the free market has failed, rampant capitalism is not the way forward and that,

sometimes, government interventions in the market are required. This is a forward step, and it will be welcomed.

It is interesting to see a much-reduced turnout in the Chamber compared with that for previous debates, particularly when you note the absence of those who have —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will, yes.

Mr Newton: If the Member feels that the free market economy has failed, perhaps he would highlight one based on a communist or strongly socialist system that would be a better example for us to follow.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention. Perhaps the next time that Mr Wells comes into the Chamber, Mr Newton will turn round and ask him how he thinks that he will get on with his trip to Cuba. *[Laughter.]* It is interesting to note the much-reduced turnout in the Chamber when we debate a very important and timely matter. Many Members who have criticised the debating of pointless motions in the Chamber are not here to listen to an important one. I take this opportunity to thank the Members of the Alliance Party for tabling it.

Many of the main points have been made, and I will not rehash any of them. However, the motion states that actions have been taken:

"to help stabilise the global economy".

It notes the opportunities that this presents for local industries to expand and local companies to increase exports. As most of our exported goods and services remain within the European Union, we are very reliant on economic growth across the EU for such expansion. However, as the failed policies of austerity continue to be pushed forward by euro zone Finance Ministers, that surge in growth will not happen. EU Ministers have clearly made shoring up the banks their main priority while the need to create employment has played second fiddle.

I think that we all agree that it is important to ensure that businesses are connected efficiently to funding sources and that their use is maximised, and we would all say that improvements have been made in recent years

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that investment in the construction industry would affect all our

constituencies? Is he not, therefore, disappointed at the continued delay in investment in our school estate?

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for her intervention. That was her second intervention and quite a good one, so I encourage her to put her name down if she wants to take part in a debate, because that is the way that it should work.

The SDLP came up with proposals for a green new deal, and I agree that it should have gone forward. There should be capital investment in our schools and other types of investment. The SDLP then commended its policy paper to the House, but that was maybe three years ago, and it has not been updated to reflect our current situation.

Further steps can be taken to improve the availability of finance streams to local businesses. Accessing credit is one of the four key pillars of a properly functioning enterprise sector. The others are reducing the cost base to a business; ensuring that there is not over-regulation or an abundance of red tape; and ensuring that there is adequate demand for the goods and services produced. Access to credit is vital to the success not only of individual businesses but the entire economy. It is, therefore, imperative that progress is made on the matter. I support the motion and the ongoing efforts of the Minister and her team to improve the situation.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Comhailtaí as ucht an seans a thabhairt dúinn an t-ábhar iontach tábhachtach seo a phlé. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank my colleagues for introducing the motion.

It is very important that we always keep a sharp focus on economic matters. That becomes even more important as we think of the young people who, day and daily, leave our shores for places such as Australia. Our future should not be exported; it should be encouraged and kept in Ireland — that is the important bit. We welcome the motion and the opportunity to debate the measures required to build a sustainable economic recovery. However, despite the comments on the actions that have been taken to help stabilise the global economy, it is not at all clear that optimism can be justified. There is still a lot to be done and a good way to go before it can be said that the worst is behind us or that we can start putting it behind us.

Members will have seen the figures detailing the fall in exports across many sectors in 2010, including, indeed, manufacturing and some of our service sectors. The construction sector was mentioned, as was the necessity for investment to ensure that that particular sector, in which many of our constituents are employed, is supported and developed.

In Europe, unemployment continues to be a worry. It is now at a high of 11·4% across the euro zone and at 10·5% in the whole of the EU, with youth unemployment in particular a serious concern. There are crises in Greece, Spain and elsewhere, and the future for the euro zone remains uncertain, as does the political future of the union itself. However, it is for member states to stabilise that and to make sure that we have stability and that any growth is based on that stability.

We have seen mixed signals so far in local businesses accessing new markets around the world. We need to see that growth, particularly in the EU. Whenever I am out and about — I am sure that this is the case for other Members — I speak to businesses. One issue that comes up, which has also come up at the Committee with the Minister, is access to clear, intelligible information about the funding that is available to support small and medium-sized enterprises. That is a key issue. I was heartened to see that someone new has been appointed in INI to deal with that issue — eventually, many might argue. We have our centre in Europe, and new staff were appointed there about six months ago. I am sure that the centre is doing a good job, and I have every confidence in the ability of some of the staff to do a good job. It is crucial that a free flow of information comes from that centre in Europe to our businesses, because it is a well-known fact that the rest of the island of Ireland was very good at snapping up EU funding to underpin many projects when this part certainly was not.

Invest NI continues to contribute to our current level of exports through its various funds, with its client companies accounting in 2010 for 82·6%, or £198·5 million, of total exports in the high-export potential group and the value of exports with that.

We heard the green new deal mentioned, and it is important that we dwell on it. Having looked at the economic analysis of the green new deal, I can see that one of its alleged weaknesses is its capacity to realise further supporting funding. That was the claimed weakness, but it remains to be seen whether that is right or wrong. At Thursday's Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee meeting, however, members put

through empowering legislation to make sure that, when the green investment bank is fully up and running — hopefully, that will not be too long — it will be there to support people, who will be able to avail themselves of it and draw down funding. We will see many people who are currently employed or unemployed in the construction sector being able to realise new potential of investment in homes, renewables and energy projects. In many ways, that can all realise a number of factors: first, they can deal with fuel poverty; secondly, they can lead to better health circumstances in people's homes;

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Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close please.

Mr McGlone: — thirdly, they can create jobs; and, finally, they can see us reducing our carbon emissions. Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am sure that we could debate this much longer and add many more issues, but —

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, your time is up.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Members for introducing the motion.

Mr Allister: When I look at the motion, the first point that intrigues me about it is the unquestioning lauding of the European Central Bank. As I look across Europe, my conclusion is that the actions and inactions of the ECB have been as much part of the problem as they have been part of the solution. In fact, the financial instability across Europe, and wider, I would have thought, has been exacerbated by the ECB's failure to deal with the euro zone contagion. We have seen it move from one country to another, courtesy of the ECB's policies. Therefore, for the Alliance Party to begin its motion by lauding the recent actions of the ECB is akin to lauding a company that specialises in home security yet has presided over record levels of break-ins. It is farcical to think that the ECB has made a positive contribution. The crisis has dragged on and on, and it has morphed into increasingly bizarre outcomes. It is clear to me that one of the central culprits is the ECB itself.

Mr Byrne: Will the Member accept that Northern Rock was the first bank that caused the major banking crisis, and it is in the jurisdiction of the Treasury?

Mr Allister: It is, but I am talking about something that is capable of affecting the global state of our economy. In due time, Northern

Rock has returned to the private sector, but its collapse is nothing compared with the global impact of the ECB's bungling.

The ECB alone has the currency-issuing capacity to provide sufficient demand to allow economies to grow, and the crisis in Europe, if not that across the world, is about lack of growth. The bond markets would not be picking off one country after another if those were economies in growth. Therefore, we have to look at how the ECB has helped or hindered. It chose — deliberately — to inflict a negative growth strategy on the region. It forced fiscal austerity, which is very good in its own place, on the weakest economies, guaranteeing that the crisis would morph into a full-blown problem. I think that the fault there lies with the German-based and German-orientated ECB.

Now, although the ECB declared its willingness to buy unlimited volumes of government debt, it will do so only if the member states are in depression. It is not a rescue plan at all. Therefore, when you look at the global context, the last people that the motion should be lauding are those in the ECB.

That having been said, let us be a little more parochial for a moment. As Mr Frew pointed out, in my constituency of North Antrim, we have some great gems of industry. Long may they be with us, and may we be spared from the globalisation attraction of some of them to elsewhere. However, for small and medium-sized businesses, two things concern me. A couple of months ago, I asked the Minister for figures on the amount of money from start-up funds that was going to my constituency. Out of the £7.5 million from Invest NI's access to finance strategy, a derisory, negligible £43,000 of the Northern Ireland spin-out funds had gone to North Antrim, and nothing at all at that stage had gone there from Co-Fund NI.

I heard another Member question whether there is equality of access to funds across Northern Ireland. It can be said that you have to apply, but Invest NI has a bounden duty to encourage, nurture, mentor and make sure that applications are brought along. Is that happening equitably?

12.00 noon

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Allister: I ask that in the context of the fact that I discovered not so long ago that, in the past five years, there had been but two, if I recall correctly —

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

Mr Allister: — visits to north Antrim by foreign companies brought by Invest NI, looking to invest in the area. Two in five years.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Allister: So, we need some equity across the area.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I very much welcome the debate and congratulate the Members who brought the motion to the Assembly. I agree that we must exploit every opportunity for businesses, however large or small, to access new markets and finance to help them survive and grow. That is precisely what the Executive have stated in their economic strategy and Programme for Government.

I was a little surprised to hear Mr Bradley say that we do not have a strategy for job creation. He then went on to ask me whether I was on track with my targets. If I have targets, they must be in a strategy somewhere, so that does not follow at all. For his information, Invest Northern Ireland and I are on target in relation to the targets set by the Executive.

We have placed the economy at the top of our agenda, recognising that economic conditions globally remain very challenging. We heard from many Members about the difficulties in Europe, and I commend Mr Allister for addressing the issues surrounding the European Central Bank. I think that discussion about that issue was lacking in today's debate, and it is one that we could have taken much further.

The core of the motion is this: we are very reliant on global forces because we are an exporting region. We need to export our goods, and, therefore, we need to look outwards and to what is happening in Europe, which, at present, is our largest export location, and to emerging markets where we want to see more exports going.

Recently, the head of the International Monetary Fund has warned that, although the world economy is still expected to experience a gradual recovery this year, growth will be weaker than predicted due to continued worries about the euro zone and, indeed, the US economy that are dragging down investor confidence. In recent months, measures have been taken to try to deal with stability in the

euro zone and the United States. The Federal Reserve has announced that it will keep interest rates low until at least mid-2015 and embark on a further round of spending of some \$40 billion a month until unemployment is significantly reduced. I hope that we will see some stability and, indeed, increased consumer confidence in two of our key trading markets.

At the UK level, we have not experienced a sustained recovery but have re-entered recession earlier this year. I very much welcome the fact that, from figures announced today, it is clear that the third quarter has been more positive for the United Kingdom economy.

Our Executive strategy, published alongside our Programme for Government in March and unanimously endorsed by the Assembly, set out what we are going to do to try to increase the competitiveness of our economy. Members will recall that the economic strategy very clearly put export-led economic growth at the centre of our ambitions. It also recognised that, in order to grow our economy and deliver prosperity and employment, we must rebalance our local economy so that it is characterised by a sustainable and growing private sector where more firms compete successfully in global markets.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does she accept that the local enterprise agency network across Northern Ireland has made a very significant contribution to the development of many SMEs? Will she give serious consideration to using that network in the future in order to provide some sort of risk-capital finance for would-be local businesses?

Mrs Foster: I do indeed recognise that contribution. Actually, we announced Enterprise Northern Ireland as the subcontractor under the small loan fund. It has subcontracted from the Ulster Community Investment Trust (UCIT), which was awarded the tender to run the programme. So, the Member will see Enterprise NI acting as an agent for small businesses across Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to that fund.

Half of our manufacturing exports in 2010-11 came from non-UK-owned firms. In the Republic of Ireland in 2010, over two thirds of Irish exports came from foreign direct investors as well as clients of the IDA. We have set ambitious targets for the export performance of our private sector over the next three years. As we all know, we want to grow it by 20%. To do that, however, we recognise that we must increase the number of our enterprises that export and seek to widen our export focus by

supporting our existing exporters as they seek to enter those all-important new markets.

To help to deliver on looking at new markets, we have been strategically assessing the markets and sectors that offer local companies the greatest opportunities to grow and diversify into new markets. In doing so, we also have to reflect — I was glad that this was mentioned — on the outcome of the Treasury work to help to rebalance our economy. As recognised in our strategy, the rebalancing of the economy will be achieved only over the longer term. Although the measures we have put in place will make our economy more competitive, I remain firmly of the view that securing the power to vary the rate of corporation tax has the ability to transform the local economy and help to boost exports and wealth creation.

I found it a little strange to hear Mr Flanagan talk about socialism and extol its benefits when his party is supporting us in supporting the reduction in corporation tax. Is that not in support of a free market as well?

It is not through just direct export support or increased FDI that we will deliver on our export targets. All aspects of the economic strategy have the ultimate goal of supporting and growing our export base. Investments in research and development and the skills base are not ends in their own right. We undertake such investments because we firmly believe that firms and economies that invest in research and development and skills and their economic infrastructure are much more successful in export markets. Mr Frew and Mr Allister mentioned Wrightbus. That is a perfect example of investing in research and development and how that benefits that company. We saw that with its £41 million export deal to Singapore, which came directly from work that the company carried out with Invest Northern Ireland in research and development.

We recognise that success in the exports market is crucial to the growth of our economy. We need to strengthen those trade links and tap into new markets. I have just returned from a visit last week to San Francisco that sought to boost trade and investment links with the Silicon Valley region. I was in Erbil, in Kurdistan, in July to open a new office and sign a memorandum of understanding with the Kurdistan regional government that will strengthen trade links and define areas of co-operation between our two regions. In April, the First Minister and deputy First Minister and I were in the Middle East and India. We met companies and political leaders, again trying to

push out into those new areas where, we believe, there are opportunities. So, to grow our economy and create jobs, it is important that we continue to develop relationships with countries such as India and in the Middle East. Building on that work, I will participate in a forthcoming trade mission to China. A couple of months ago, I spoke at a "Doing business in the Gulf States" seminar at which over 70 companies heard about the opportunities in that region. This morning, I spoke at a "Doing business in Hong Kong" event. We are trying very much to bring Northern Ireland companies together and alert them to the range of support available to help them to exploit those opportunities.

I heard Mrs Cochrane and, I think, Ms McLaughlin, say that we need to do more to let people know what is available to them. We are doing more than we have ever done to do that. In relation to Horizon 2020, we have a new website. We have just appointed somebody in DETI to take forward that work, Dr Stratton. We have somebody from Invest Northern Ireland in our Brussels office. MLAs need to play their part to let companies in their regions know what is available to them. I am happy to work with MLAs and to give them all the information that they need to do just that. We are also encouraging more companies to export through advice and consultancy support for new exporters to help them to develop the necessary exporting skills.

Of course, the key element of the motion is access to finance. Having a local banking sector that meets the needs of consumers, obviously, and businesses by providing bank lending on a competitive basis to local SMEs is absolutely vital to economic recovery. I have often said in this place that the banks have not stepped up to the mark in that regard. We have repeatedly spoken to the banks about what they need to do for businesses here. I fully appreciate that the wider context is difficult and that the global financial crisis has resulted in less money being available for lending. However, a situation in which lending is so severely constrained that it prevents viable local firms accessing the working capital and growth finance that they need is simply unacceptable.

Access to finance and bank lending to SMEs is obviously a national issue; it is not just a Northern Ireland problem. However, Mr Cree made the point that we have a more complex situation here than in other parts of the United Kingdom. The structure of our banking sector is fundamentally different from that in the rest of the UK given the degree of foreign ownership. In addition, our property exposure in Northern

Ireland has left our banking sector very severely constrained.

We will continue to push the banks to see what more they can do. Indeed, the Finance Minister continues to meet the banks very frequently. He has expressed serious concerns about the effectiveness of past initiatives in Northern Ireland and national initiatives that have come to Northern Ireland. Mr McKay mentioned the funding for lending scheme that was launched in August this year, which is a government-backed bank that was announced by the Business Secretary, Vince Cable. I am pleased that one of our firms has received funding under that scheme through the Ulster Bank. Mr McKay asked which banks are taking up the scheme. To my knowledge, only the Ulster Bank has taken up the scheme at this point. It remains, of course, to be seen how the scheme is implemented. The Finance Minister will press for it to be constructed in such a way that it will be open to smaller regional banks such as ours. We will keep very close to Treasury and give it feedback on how the scheme is working.

As was mentioned many times throughout the debate, through Invest Northern Ireland we have an access to finance initiative. That is a suite of support that totals more than £100 million to help firms of all sizes and at all stages. On Mr Allister's point about NISPO fund and Co-Fund NI, I suggest to him that businesses in north Antrim will certainly be able to apply to the growth loan fund and the small business loan fund. They may be more applicable than the NISPO fund and Co-Fund, which are more specialised in what they have to offer.

I was pleased that the growth loan fund recently announced that it had made its first loan and that it has a strong pipeline of businesses seeking support. It is also pleasing, as I have already indicated, that the small business loan fund will be operational as soon as all the FSA approvals are in place. The NISPO fund has been operational since 2009, and the Co-Fund has been operational since 2011. In addition to those, Invest NI plans to bring forward two £30 million development funds so that it plugs the gap that it sees in Northern Ireland.

I recognise that it is not always easy to pinpoint the specific difficulties in access to funding and the practical steps that can be taken to overcome them. That is why I have asked the economic advisory group to carry out a review that will detail the funds, the programme and the support available to businesses. It will identify any gaps in current provision and make recommendations on how the situation might be

improved. Given the funds that we have put in place, the economic advisory group's work is very timely. I look forward to receiving the report.

We have a strategy in place to help us to deal with the difficulties in front of us. Where we can accelerate implementation, we will, of course, do that. Where we can identify new initiatives to support business and grow the economy, we will also do that. The important point is that the economic strategy is not set in stone; it is a living document, which I think was Mr Frew's point. It will continue to evolve, and through close co-operation with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Chair of the Committee —

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

Mrs Foster: — we can make the economic strategy work for everybody in Northern Ireland.

12.15 pm

Mr Dickson: I thank my colleague Judith Cochrane for tabling the motion. It is clear that, by doing so, she is trying to set out ideas on how the Assembly can work to ensure that our targets in the economic strategy are met. I welcome the opportunity to make the winding-up speech. I will make some comments after I have gone through Members' contributions.

I think that, overwhelmingly, Members positively support the Minister's work on these matters, and there was general support across the broad political spectrum in the Chamber for her work. That support came, clearly, from Mr Newton and even from Mr McKay. I was somewhat uncertain about what Mr Cree was trying to tell us when he said that he had some difficulty understanding the motion. No one else in the Chamber seemed to have any difficulty, and all Members who contributed to the debate did so in a very important way.

Mr Cree: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Cree: Perhaps the Member will tell us exactly what the point about the benefits of the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank is.

Mr Dickson: Perhaps the Member will tell us what his plan B is. Indeed, it is sad that his leader is not here to explain that plan B to us. I would have thought that the two major planks of

the global economy were fairly self-evident to anyone who is trying to understand how we got into the recession. We all know how we got into it, and we are now trying to work to get out of it. Even Mr Allister was very helpful with his comments and insight into the ECB and the political difficulties. Having been a Member of the European Parliament, he has a better insight into that than, perhaps, many in the Chamber.

Members commented on a range of issues that affected their constituencies and the economy. However, one clear message came through from all the comments: quite simply, there is a need to ensure that there are appropriate finances to allow small and medium-sized enterprises and others to place their business aggressively onto a solid financial footing to allow them to move forward. Clear reference was also made to global companies operating in Northern Ireland and how they should be sustained.

Interestingly, although Members criticised the banks, no one referred to the improvements that have taken place. I am certainly not an apologist for the banks, but improvements have taken place, even in the banking sector. A piece of research concluded that 61% of businesses in Northern Ireland are accessing appropriate bank financing; Members were obviously asleep when that report was referred to on Radio Ulster this morning. There is some satisfaction, which is improving.

Other Members referred to their constituency. I have a particular interest in East Antrim, where the Minister and others have worked very hard with FG Wilson to deal with the issues there. We have a skilled workforce, and we have to see those skills diverted into other jobs and businesses that are looking for those skills.

We are all clearly in agreement that we need to grow the private sector in Northern Ireland. That is how we will generate wealth and increase employment opportunities for everyone in this society. The need for a strong export focus has been referred to throughout the debate, and we need companies that can compete on an international stage. However, companies can compete on that international stage only if they have access to appropriate finance and, in the first instance, if they have access to information about how they can get that finance. The Minister made it clear this morning that, through INI and other agencies, she is working to ensure that the information stream is available, whether on websites or through direct advisers.

This is a challenging task given the ongoing international economic difficulties, but the people of Northern Ireland, our business leaders, our workforce and our entrepreneurs are able to rise to the challenge. The Assembly and Executive have a clear duty to support them. It is clearly part of the Programme for Government that we should stand firmly behind businesses in Northern Ireland and create the appropriate incentives and conditions to encourage a dynamic, high-growth, sustainable economy.

Our economy has to be responsive and resilient to changes in technology, the global economy and population changes. It is important that we acknowledge any shortcomings, but we also need to make sure that, where practical, we send out a relentlessly positive message. There have been recent positive developments in the economy in Northern Ireland. We no longer have the lowest GDP per capita in the UK; the percentage of UK jobs created in Northern Ireland is more than double our percentage of the UK population; and, in software and IT and per capita foreign direct investment we are running at twice the rate of either London or Manchester. There are positives coming out of Northern Ireland, and every Member in the Chamber has a duty to support that.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate the Member's giving way. Although I share the idea of being relentlessly positive, there is also a need to be positively honest. The facts are that our economic performance is not good, youth unemployment is rocketing and we are failing as an Executive and Assembly to respond strategically. We will continue to fail if we have debates that deny the inaction at the heart of our Executive on the basic issue of job creation.

Mrs Foster: It is a good job you are in for the debate.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Minister has, I think, commented from a sedentary position that the Member should bring that debate. I encourage him to do so, because I can be positive on those aspects as well. Of course, I am not denying that there is unemployment and that it is a serious issue. I am not denying that the banks have not been co-operating, but I am saying that we have an economic strategy that takes into account all those issues. One reason for the good supply of graduates — I compliment Dr Farry on his work — is the contribution of our universities and education system to providing people with an appropriate

education. However, even there, all is not perfect.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes, I will.

Mr Eastwood: Does the Member agree that it is difficult for a city such as Derry to develop its economy without a properly sized university? We have around 3,000 full-time students when we need 10,000. Does the Member agree that his Minister should do much more to develop the university at Magee?

Mr Dickson: I suggest to the Member that the Minister has been doing an excellent job in providing places for universities. That allows students to take the appropriate courses in the appropriate places on multiple sites across Northern Ireland, including Magee. We cannot all have everything.

We are extremely proud of our globally competitive companies such as Bombardier, Almac and Wrightbus, but the weaknesses in the local economy are how little we export; the fact that research and development activity relies heavily on a handful of firms; and the fact that many small and medium-sized enterprises are plagued by low productivity and a lack of competitiveness. However, these issues are being addressed. My colleague Judith Cochrane —

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way, I appreciate it. I also appreciate how all that the Member has said in the House today has had a positive slant. It is vital that MLAs have that positive slant. We all know the issues and problems, and those in business know them better than anyone. We do not need to keep on echoing the problems; we need to sell Northern Ireland and be positive when speaking here. I ask Mr McDevitt whether he thinks it in order for someone who has not heard the debate to come into the Chamber and comment on it. Some of the positives are the fact that, after London, Belfast is the most attractive UK city for FDI, particularly in technology and financial services. In the past three years, Northern Ireland, with 2·8% of the population, has won 7% of the FDI that has been attracted to the UK. Belfast is now among the top 10 cities globally for financial technology investments and is ahead of Dublin, Glasgow, Toronto and even Bangalore. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is running out. That was a lengthy intervention.

Mr Dickson: I will return to the debate in hand, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the two Members concerned can have their debate elsewhere.

There is an important message to be sent out from the Assembly today. Too often, the criticism has been made of the Assembly that we have not been concentrating on the issues that affect people in their homes and lives and in developing their children or on providing for a stable economy in Northern Ireland in the future. Today is one of those days when we have been able to see and hear the positive side of developing in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Dickson: We must take advantage of the opportunities that arise. We need to think about the strategies that have gone before, and we need to learn the lessons of the past.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the recent action taken by the European Central Bank and the US Federal Reserve to help stabilise the global economy and the opportunities that this presents for Northern Ireland companies to expand and to increase exports; recognises the continuing problems of small and medium-sized enterprises accessing bank lending; further notes the availability of several significant sources of business finance; and calls on the Executive to use their influence to ensure that businesses are connected efficiently to these funding sources and that their use is maximised.

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

The sitting was suspended at 12.26 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that questions 1 and 3 have been withdrawn.

Child Poverty

2. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of a child poverty action plan. (AQO 2558/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): In developing a child poverty action plan, Departments have been asked to bring forward a small number of high-level strategic actions that will contribute to the objectives of the child poverty strategy. Those actions are in addition to the work that Departments are already undertaking to address child poverty. Through our strategy framework, Delivering Social Change, we are focused on developing a child poverty outcomes model that will reflect the separate inputs of all Departments. The junior Ministers recently had a series of bilateral meetings with our ministerial colleagues to promote the development of the outcomes model.

As part of the ongoing work, we recently commissioned the Children's Bureau NI and the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO) to support Departments in developing the most effective model possible. As part of the first phase of that work, the Children's Bureau and the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services, in conjunction with Mark Friedman, director of the Fiscal Policy Studies Institute (FPSI) in New Mexico, delivered a workshop last Monday to the Delivering Social Change programme board. The junior Ministers met Mr Friedman after the workshop to discuss further his work regarding an outcomes-based model and to hear the benefits of using such an approach.

For all of us, the objective is to see a sustained reduction in poverty and the associated issues across all ages and an improvement in children and young people's health, well-being and life

opportunities, thereby breaking the long-term cycle of multigenerational problems.

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for his reply. Given that 28% of children in the North now live in poverty and we are the only devolved area in which child poverty is rising, will he now recognise the need to set our own independent targets to measure the challenge and meet it effectively?

Mr M McGuinness: The targets are there, and they are very clear. The Child Poverty Act 2010 sets out targets against which the success of the strategy will be measured. The targets are to reduce relative low income, which means that fewer than 10% of children should live in a household in which income is less than 60% of the median, and to reduce combined low income and material deprivation, which means that fewer than 5% of children should live in a household in which income is less than 70% of the median and there is material deprivation. There is a range of targets. Revising targets or setting new ones will not necessarily make it easier for us to meet the challenges that are clearly there to bring about a reduction in child poverty. What is clear from the approach that we have taken is that Delivering Social Change offers us the opportunity to take a range of focused measures.

As I said in my initial answer, the junior Ministers met all the Departments to ensure that we moving forward in a joined-up way. The Programme for Government includes a range of focused, OFMDFM-led cross-cutting initiatives that seek to place a particular focus on deprivation and on children and young people. That includes the delivery of £40 million of social investment fund capital expenditure to address dereliction and promote investment in the physical regeneration of deprived areas; £40 million of social investment fund resource expenditure to improve pathways to employment, tackle systemic issues linked to deprivation and increase community services; and a range of measures to tackle poverty and social inclusion, including a child poverty action plan and compliance with —

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

Mr M McGuinness: — the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Does the

Minister believes that the introduction of the Welfare Reform Act in England and the introduction of the Bill here will have an impact on the Executive's ability to address child poverty?

Mr M McGuinness: It is too early to assess the full impact of any welfare reform legislation on families and children here. There are concerns, given the forecasts in a number of recent reports by the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. We also have to take it into consideration that the coalition Government at Westminster have frozen child benefit, reduced housing benefit, cut maternity grants, reduced childcare subsidies and frozen or cut working families' tax credit. All of that will have an impact on our ability to address child poverty, and it is in that vein that we are seeking to ensure that we take whatever steps are available to us to ameliorate the worst aspects of welfare reform.

Mr Cree: I thank the deputy First Minister for his responses. He mentioned the social investment fund (SIF), which could play a big part in tackling child poverty. Has that £80 million been allocated?

Mr M McGuinness: As people know, the aim of the fund is to address poverty, unemployment and dereliction, as I said. Our Executive agreed their final operation on 17 May 2012. As a result, SIF will operate across nine identified zones, with a cross-sectoral steering group being established in each zone to develop a strategic area plan.

It is not intended that all areas in a zone will benefit, and to ensure that funding is targeted at all areas of need the following eligibility criteria will be applied. The areas targeted will be those in the top 10% of the most deprived super output areas in the multiple deprivation measure 2010; those in the top 20% of the most deprived super output areas in the key domains of income, employment, education and health; and those that can provide independently verified and robust evidence of objective need linked to the four strategic objectives of the social investment fund. We are in the process of finalising steering group membership and expect to be in a position to publish details in the coming days.

We also recognise that it is important to spend the money in the right way. There may be some concern about the slowness this year to spend the type of money that we originally targeted. However, all of that money will still go into the social investment fund and will be spent

in a way that ensures that we get the best result.

Obviously, tackling child poverty is a huge priority for the Executive, and we recognise that we can use the funds available to us. Separate from that, over the next few days, there will be significant announcements on how funds can be applied in the here and now, as opposed to waiting for next year. People should keep their ears to the news over the next few days, because there will be important announcements that Members will find positive.

Age Discrimination: Goods and Services

4. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Programme for Government commitment to extend age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods and services. (AQO 2560/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Anti-discrimination legislation in relation to age is limited to the fields of employment, vocational training and further and higher education. The Programme for Government commitment to extend age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services will require new legislation to be taken through the Assembly. Prior to a new Bill being introduced in the Assembly, there are a considerable number of steps that have to be taken to ensure that the legislation achieves its intended outcome. That involves a period of detailed policy development, and that is the stage that we are now at. Over the next few months, we will be working with our officials, other Departments, the OFMDFM Committee and the Executive to finalise this stage of policy development in preparation for the consultation stage. It is our intention that the public consultation on legislation to combat age discrimination in goods, facilities and services will take place early in 2013. Following analysis of the consultation responses, the Bill will progress through the required Assembly stages, and we aim to have the legislation in place during the latter part of 2014-15. That is in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give a commitment to the House that there will be no delay in the procession of that legislation and that it will deal simply with adults to ensure that we have the statute in place as soon as possible?

Mr M McGuinness: As far as we are concerned, there will be no delay. There will be many different opinions on how we take this forward. From the perspective of the Executive and the Programme for Government commitment that we have put before the House, we absolutely expect to keep to the timetable that we have outlined.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Does the deputy First Minister believe that young people under the age of 18 should be included in the scope of the proposed legislation?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said, there will be different opinions about this. Consideration is being given to whether young people under 18 years of age should be included in the scope of the legislation. I am sure that the Member, like all of us, would not want to see anyone, including young people, discriminated against. That will have to be agreed, and, as I said, we have not come to any final decision on that.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the single equality Bill be introduced in this mandate?

Mr M McGuinness: The question is outside the limits of the question that Mr Humphrey posed a number of minutes ago. The issue of a single equality Bill would have to be agreed by the Executive, and, thus far, we have not received any indication whatsoever that agreement on that is imminent.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

5. **Mr I McCrea** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. (AQO 2561/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I remain committed to building a united and shared community by continuing to improve community relations across our society. Bringing forward a robust community relations strategy with a clear framework for action will be a critical part of achieving our vision of a better future for everyone. We very much recognise the importance of translating the Executive's commitment into clear, meaningful action, and we have asked the cross-party working group to conclude its work on developing the strategy as a matter of urgency. We expect to receive a report from the working group in the coming weeks, which will allow a final strategy and high-level action plan to be published shortly thereafter.

Mr I McCrea: Will the deputy First Minister not accept that his actions and, indeed, those of another Minister from his party in attending a parade in Dungiven do not do anything to help to build community relations? Will he accept that that needs to be addressed?

Mr M McGuinness: I am an Irish republican, and I am privileged and honoured to attend Irish republican commemorations. All the commemorations that I attend receive clearance from the police and the Parades Commission, and I am only interested in attending commemorations that are within the law. It is absolutely vital that all Members recognise that we have to abide by the rule of law, and, as I have said in interviews in recent weeks, people need to abide by the determinations of the Parades Commission. The last thing that we need on our streets is contention and conflict. From first-hand experience, I know how damaging that can be to our efforts to attract foreign direct investment. Priorities need to be got right, and we need to recognise that we are in the face of one the worst economic crises that the world has seen. As an Executive, we have a job to battle against that and to provide jobs for our young people and to provide services for our people. We can only do that if we do so against the backdrop of a peaceful environment. In the past couple of years, the First Minister and I have brought in more foreign direct investment jobs than at any other time in the history of the state. We can only do that if we can portray to the world that the peace process is moving forward and continuing. The last things that we need are setbacks, such as those that we have seen in the past couple of weeks.

2.15 pm

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat. Has the decade of centenaries been raised during the CSI process?

Mr M McGuinness: The decade of centenaries was raised during the public consultation on the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. The potential impact of the decade of centenaries is one of the issues that is under consideration by the cross-party working group in the context of finalising the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy.

Commemorative anniversaries undoubtedly can influence wider relations in the community and are closely linked with issues of cultural expression and shared heritage. We clearly recognise that the decade of centenaries that we have now entered presents a challenge to

all of us and highlights the need for a mature and balanced approach. We are committed to providing the necessary leadership through the Executive to ensure that anniversaries are marked in a reflective, inclusive and responsible way.

There is a big challenge, and, as we have seen from the events of the past couple of weeks, there have been some initial difficulties. I hope that we can overcome those. We can only do it through being mature, not using intemperate language and recognising that, as we move forward, we have a duty and responsibility to the people we represent to ensure that the anniversaries are dealt with in a respectful way. For me, it comes down to people showing good manners and respect for each other and recognising that the last thing that we need, as an Executive, is any circumstance that brings people onto the streets to engage in acts of violence. That is totally detrimental to our economic strategies as we move forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members not to engage in loud conversations. It is distracting to me and other Members. If you wish to have conversations, please leave the Chamber.

Mr Lyttle: Will any new framework for dealing with parades and protests be included in the forthcoming CSI strategy?

Mr M McGuinness: It was unfortunate that the Alliance Party, which in its contributions to the workings of this Assembly has mostly shown itself to be very reflective and mature, stepped out of those important discussions. With the benefit of hindsight, it might admit that it made a mistake. I pay tribute to the representatives from my party, the Democratic Unionist Party and the SDLP who have stayed with it. Until the Alliance Party stepped out — incomprehensibly, the Ulster Unionists stepped out also — important and significant progress had been made. Even since the departure of the Ulster Unionists and the Alliance Party, more progress has been made, and, during the discussions, all the issues that proved difficult in the past were shown to be capable of resolution. I said that it was incomprehensible that the Ulster Unionist Party stepped out, but, given what we have heard over the past couple of days, that party needs to be involved in a process of cohesion, sharing and integration itself.

The serious point is that we are now rapidly coming to a conclusion that I believe the majority of representatives in the House can sign up for. I hope that the Ulster Unionist

Party and the Alliance Party will reflect on the folly of their position and, at the end of the process, finally come on board.

Mr Eastwood: Given the events of recent weeks and the tone of some debates in the House, does the deputy First Minister agree that it is now even more important that we get this right and do so as quickly as possible?

Mr M McGuinness: I 100% agree. It is hugely important that we get it right, given that there is a responsibility right across the community on everybody to contribute to peace on the streets. We, as the political leaders, have to lead by example, and it is our duty and responsibility to behave in such a way that we do not use intemperate language. We have seen some venom on the streets, and we had three nights of rioting, during which large numbers of police were injured and the community was disrupted. The bad news stories about that travelled all around the world. I was in Washington just over two weeks ago and was told that the three nights of rioting in north Belfast was a news item on Brazilian news. That is the last thing that we need. If that nonsense travels all around the world — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: — how will that not work against our attempts to create jobs and opportunities for our young people? It is time for people to get real and recognise that, in dealing with these important occasions, civility and good manners need to be shown.

Maze/ Long Kesh Development Corporation

6. **Mr B McCrea** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the forward work programme of the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation board. (AQO 2562/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation is now in place and will take forward the regeneration of the Maze/Long Kesh site. One of the corporation's initial responsibilities will be to prepare a three-year corporate plan that will set out its forward work programme and identify the resources required for its delivery. The work programme will be within the context of the objectives set by Ministers to maximise the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site and seek to deliver the targets set out in the Programme for Government, which are to launch the

development plan for Maze/Long Kesh in 2012-13, to host the 2013 Balmoral show at the site and to complete the peace-building and conflict resolution centre by 2015.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister accept that public confidence in the public appointment process for the board has been damaged somewhat and that that has the potential to undermine the work envisaged? What steps has he in mind to try to address that issue?

Mr M McGuinness: I wonder how people assess where public confidence lies. People are hugely heartened by the fact that the First Minister and I had the ability to put in place a development corporation that is truly reflective of our entire community. The board has people with particular expertise who can take forward what is probably the prime development site on this island.

We have already seen hugely important developments, with the announcement from Europe of £20 million for the iconic peace-building and conflict resolution centre. The Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) is now on site constructing its building so that it can be up and running for 2013. All of that represents tremendous progress.

There has been some recent debate about the people who were appointed to the board. The people appointed have the First Minister's confidence and mine. They were appointed because they have a particular expertise, and we believe that they will take forward our objectives of ensuring that the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of that site can be utilised for the benefit of all our people.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt don LeasChéad-Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé dúinn inniu. Just to let you know, Mr Campbell, that that was as Gaeilge — maith thú.

I welcome the fact that the corporation is in place, and I wish it well in its work on that important site. Will the deputy First Minister take the opportunity to inform us whether all the appointments, including that of the chair, fell within the code of practice?

Mr M McGuinness: The requirements for candidates for public appointment are outlined in the code of practice for ministerial public appointments. They do not include a requirement to declare membership of a

political party. Four other appointees declared political activity.

The first interview process, in October and November 2011, identified neither a suitable appointee for the post of chair nor a sufficient pool of applicants appointable as board members. We decided — rightly, I think — to rerun the competition.

Obviously, a big discussion point has been the participation of Terence Brannigan in all this. Mr Brannigan was a member of the selection panel for the initial competition. He declined to be involved in the second selection panel and subsequently decided to apply for the position of chair of the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. Our officials consulted the Commissioner for Public Appointments to take his view on the matter, and the commissioner advised that Mr Brannigan was entitled to apply and should be treated in the same manner as any other candidate throughout the process.

Ministers have no involvement in the interview process for any public appointment. As I said, the First Minister and I are absolutely committed to maximising the economic, historical and reconciliation potential of the site for the benefit of our entire community. In recent months, the development with the RUAS and the award of funding has pushed the whole process forward. So, as plans progress, the regeneration of the site will send a powerful physical signal that highlights how our society has been transformed and regenerated and is moving beyond conflict.

Mr Dallat: I agree with the Minister that full confidence needs to be restored in this place, and I am sure that, over the past few days, with the statue of Lord Carson getting a facelift, it is being restored. On a serious note, when can we get the business plan for the Long Kesh site?

Mr M McGuinness: That will obviously be a matter for the board. It is over to them; it is their duty and responsibility.

When I saw the scaffolding going up around Lord Castle — Lord Carson; sorry about that — I thought that it was for the purpose of putting a hurl in his hand. I know that many unionist representatives are very proud of the fact that, when Lord Carson was in Dublin, he participated in one of our most powerful national games, as we saw recently in the great victory of Kilkenny over Galway.

On the issue of the responsibility to develop the site, it is now over to the board. It is a board

that the First Minister and I and, I believe, the vast majority of Members have confidence in, with the possible exception of the man who is about to get up: Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: I take that as a compliment. *[Laughter.]* In terms of what will be rolled out at the Maze, will the Minister tell us whether his colleague Raymond McCartney was correct when he said that the listed and retained buildings will be open to the public and that there will be the opportunity for the many stories of the jail to be told there? Will the listed and retained buildings be open and open for that purpose?

Mr M McGuinness: I am glad that I managed to bring a smile to the Member's face.

People need to be aware that the public have had access to the listed buildings over the past couple of years without any controversy whatsoever. As for how those buildings will be used in the future, that will be a matter of agreement. We are mature enough to ensure, between ourselves and the development corporation, that the peace-building and conflict resolution centre that we construct at what is an incredible site will be a shrine to peace and not a shrine to conflict.

Social Investment Fund

7. **Mr Copeland** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the social investment fund. (AQO 2563/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Following Executive agreement on the final operation of the social investment fund, we are in the process of establishing cross-sectoral steering groups to co-ordinate the development of a strategic area plan in each social investment zone over the coming months. We will confirm membership of each steering group in the next few days. Following that, we will move to the area planning stage, in recognition of the need to expedite the area planning process and the work involved. We have recently completed a tendering exercise to establish a framework of organisations to support the steering groups in developing the area plan. They will be contracted to help to identify evidence and proposed relevant interventions for inclusion in the area plans in consultation with the wider community. That will include consultation with all relevant stakeholder and community organisations. It is our aim to have area plans submitted early next year, with a view to commencing the delivery of approved projects soon thereafter.

Mr Copeland: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Will he outline where, in his view, the blockages are that prevent the SIF being administered? What communication has there been with the communities being denied the use of the fund? Will he also update the House on any outstanding appointments that need to be made to allow the process to move forward?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, a lot of work is happening with local communities, because we passionately believe that, for the SIF project to work, their very active participation is required.

So, at the moment, we are involved and are very close to agreement about the release of information on the steering groups' composition. There is a timescale for all this. I think, essentially, we are talking about the full benefit of the fund being seen by, I suppose, next year, given the amount of work that has to be done. We are now very close to the end of this year, and, as we move forward, we think that we are better taking our time, getting it right, ensuring that we have the right people in the different zones and different areas for the steering groups, and ensuring that they have every opportunity to consider what projects they would like to propose for funding from the social investment fund.

2.30 pm

Finance and Personnel

Rates

1. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what was the total amount of unpaid rates over the last four years. (AQO 2571/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): At the end of the 2011-12 financial year, the rating debt was £160.8 million. That is a provisional figure that includes the rating of empty homes, which is subject to audit. The figure excluding the rating of empty homes, which allows comparison with the previous three years, was £153.6 million. The audited year-end amount for 2008 was £138.1 million; for 2009-2010 it was £157 million; and for 2010-11 it was £155.6 million.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Is he satisfied that Land and Property Services has sufficient capacity to ensure the maximum collection of annual rates?

Mr Wilson: One should consider that the amount of rates that was collected this year is the highest that it has ever been — it is up, I think, by £50 million. That ignores the fact that properties have, of course, been added to the list because of the rating of empty homes. So, that is the highest rate of collection that we have had.

However, the situation can always be improved. As I said to the Assembly previously, that has to be balanced against the economic circumstances in which we find ourselves and against the difficulties that people have in paying their rates. I am sure that all Members — they write to me quite frequently about people who are in difficulties — would wish us to be as flexible as possible whenever people get into difficulties. However, that then means, of course, that the uncollected debt goes up.

Lord Morrow: Just have a listen to the Minister's reply: the figures that he supplied are quite startling. Does he have any new initiative to ensure that rates are paid, bearing in mind that many ratepayers, particularly in the retail sector, are struggling at this time and feel very discouraged when they discover that others are not paying?

Mr Wilson: I do not know that there is any new initiative. Maybe I should outline the things that we do. First, we try to get bills out as quickly as possible so that there is not a big delay that results in people being hit with a rates bill that is two or three years behind. That is not always possible, but we try to do it. We also work with the building control departments of councils, and, once a completion certificate comes through, we get the property on to the valuation list.

Secondly, when people get into difficulties, we try to get them into arrangements as quickly as possible.

Thirdly, when people do not pay, refuse to pay or have shown over time that they are not going to abide by the arrangements, we will go for court action.

Lastly, of course, if we have to, we will take people to the point of bankruptcy. We do not wish to do that, but, as the Member pointed out, many people struggle to pay their rates but believe that it is their obligation to do so and will make sacrifices to do it. We cannot allow them to be penalised because others simply decide that they will not bother to pay.

Mr Gardiner: Is the Minister satisfied that Land and Property Services and the Rates Collection Agency have adequate resources and training to improve their performances?

Mr Wilson: We have devoted extra resources. Indeed, Land and Property Services has been given extra resources to facilitate the work that it has to do. Of course, all agencies would argue that they could use more resources. There is not a Department that will not argue that it wants more staff, and so on. However, that has to be balanced against the budgetary considerations and pressures under which we work. If we push up administrative costs in Land and Property Services or in any Department, it means that there will be less money for front line services.

Rates: Unoccupied Buildings

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much was collected in rates for unoccupied buildings in the 2011-12 financial year. (AQO 2572/11-15)

Mr Wilson: During the 2011-12 financial year, a total of £24,770,406 was collected in relation to properties that were unoccupied as at 31 March 2012. It should be noted that some of those properties may have been occupied at some point during the financial year.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. What steps is Land and Property Services (LPS) taking to collect the debt for those properties?

Mr Wilson: We have focused our attention on debt, and we have formulated a debt action plan, which has now become a very important line in the business activity. The plan focuses on cases moving through various recovery stages, including court action and eventual referral to the Enforcement of Judgments Office. That is for persistent non-payers, who will be pursued to the point of bankruptcy. In the past year, the court processes issued by LPS rose to almost 3,000 cases. Approximately 46,000 decrees were issued and 19,000 awarded in 2011-12, which is an increase of 1,500.

Mr McKay: The Minister will be aware that there is an increasingly high level of vacant properties in our town centres. Will he outline what he will be doing to address the problems faced by those owners?

Mr Wilson: The Assembly can take some pleasure from knowing that we are leading the way in initiatives to try to deal with unoccupied and empty properties in town centres.

Around this time last year, the Assembly agreed to the 50% discount on rates for properties that were unoccupied for more than a year before a business took them over. That is now being copied in Scotland. Only last week, the Finance Minister in Scotland announced an initiative along the same lines; I think that the Scottish Government have called it Fresh Start. They have copied our scheme almost word for word.

I have to say that I have seen some very good examples of businesses that have started up as a result of the 50% rates holiday that they get. Indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker, in Larne in our constituency, I visited premises called Eco-Kidz. One of the factors that influenced the person who started up the business to do so was the fact that, in the first year, she would get a rate reduction of almost £1,000. That economic factor influenced her decision to set up in the premises.

Mrs D Kelly: Has there been any discussion between the Minister and the Minister for Social Development on empty residential properties, particularly in the newbuild sector, that could be used to alleviate the waiting lists for housing.

Mr Wilson: That really would be a matter for the Department for Social Development and the housing associations. Many housing associations are purchasing properties off the shelf where they have been built and are empty.

One of the problems has been that the standards laid down for public sector housing or housing association houses are different from those for the private sector, but I think the Social Development Minister is addressing that. I have had horror stories from builders who have told me that they have been told to take out en suite bathrooms, for example, because they are not part of the standard for social housing, even though they probably enhance the standard of the property. They have also been told to cut a kitchen in half and to take off a conservatory from the back of the kitchen because, again, the space standards are different from those laid down. That is the kind of nonsense, which, I think, has to be addressed, so that some properties that have been built for the private sector, but which have not been sold, can be brought into use in the social sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, I remind Members to refrain from talking in the Chamber. I do not wish to have to name a Member.

Ulster Bank: Compensation

3. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the Ulster Bank's redress package, particularly the onus being placed on customers to initiate claims. (AQO 2573/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Assessing the Ulster Bank redress scheme and ensuring that it satisfies the bank's statutory duties is a matter for the regulator, the Financial Services Authority. I recognise that some customers have been disappointed by the scale of compensation on offer, but it is a decision that the bank has taken, and I have no formal responsibility in that regard.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his brief response. Has he met the Financial Services Authority in its role as the bank regulator, to satisfy himself with all that it is doing for Ulster Bank customers?

Mr Wilson: I have not met the Financial Services Authority, but I did speak to the Ulster Bank before the scheme was brought out. First, I indicated to the bank that I was disappointed that it took so long, and, secondly, I indicated to it that it needed to sell the scheme to its customers. Ultimately, it will be the customers who will make the decision as to whether they are satisfied with the scheme and on whether they feel that it has given them fair compensation for the difficulties they experienced. The role of the Financial Services Authority is beyond the competency of the Assembly, but I look forward to its independent report on why it took so long to sort out the Ulster Bank problems here in Northern Ireland.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will probably have heard that the Ulster Bank has recently joined in the funding for lending scheme. Will he update us on progress regarding the other banks' participation in that scheme?

Mr Wilson: I met the Finance Secretary in London — I think it was at the beginning of July — and indicated to him that I believed that any schemes being brought out by the Treasury to help bank lending need to be tailored to Northern Ireland. Indeed, I had a similar

conversation with the Secretary of State just last week, and she is going to make representations along with me to ensure that this happens in future.

When the finance for lending scheme was introduced by the Government, one thing I was pleased about was that the Finance Secretary called in all of the banks in Northern Ireland as a result of the representations that we made. All of them gave a positive response to the initiative. To date, only the Ulster Bank has signed up to it. I understand that Barclays Bank is to announce its participation in the scheme and the details of that participation. I think it is to do that before the end of October. I suppose we have to keep pressure on the other banks to do that. The important thing about it is that it is one scheme where, I believe, rewards can be linked to performance, because the banks must show that they are lending to businesses before they can have the facility of getting cheaper money from the Bank of England, which helps them to reduce interest rates or give discounts on interest rates to customers.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. The Minister engaged with Ulster Bank and RBS at the start of July, as did the Enterprise Committee and the Finance Committee. At that time, we were assured that the redress system would be put in place within a few days. Will the Minister outline to the House why it took so long for the Ulster Bank compensation scheme to be put in place? Does he agree that the measly £20 compensation payment was too little too late for consumers?

2.45 pm

Mr Wilson: First of all, I am not on the board of Ulster Bank, so I do not have control of it. Secondly, the details had to be worked out with the Financial Services Authority. I do not know whether the Financial Services Authority raised queries about the compensation scheme or whether Ulster Bank was slow in bringing the proposals forward. I know that some customers are disappointed.

Ultimately, of course — and I made this point to Ulster Bank in July — the longer the bank delayed, the more the sore was going to agitate; the more the sore agitated, the angrier its customers were going to get. Ultimately, Ulster Bank will pay the price in the market for that, and I understand that it is already losing customers. I have met people who were more than satisfied with the compensation package; I

have met other people who are very angry about the compensation package. However, the compensation package was not something that the Assembly or the Department of Finance had any control over; neither did we have any control over the timing of it.

Rates: Rented Accommodation

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why the owner or landlord of a house in multiple occupation is responsible for the collection and payment of rates regardless of capital value or frequency of rent payment, while responsibility for other rented accommodation is based on capital valuation and frequency of rent payment. (AQO 2574/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The landlord liability provisions in rating legislation, which make, in most circumstances, the owner or landlord liable for rates rather than tenants, is a long-established feature of the rating system here. Its origins are in earlier legislation dating back 90 years. It applies to lower value single family residences and all houses in multiple occupation (HMOs), because that is where the problems are likely to occur: in collecting rates directly from tenants who tend to move about more than most. The reason we make it a landlord liability is that, for Land and Property Services to pursue tenants, some of whom stay only for very short periods, would be very costly administratively and more likely to result in debt increasing. For that reason, for HMOs, the responsibility lies with the landlord.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is his assessment of the increase of HMOs in some areas, particularly adjacent to Queen's University in Belfast, and the impact that has on the rateable value of non-HMO properties in those same areas?

Mr Wilson: That issue would be better addressed by the Department for Social Development (DSD). As for the impact on established families living in those areas, I do not think that HMOs do anything to the rateable value of homes in those areas, in so far as property prices tend to go up because of demand from landlords who wish to expand. Therefore, the capital value of the houses will tend to increase. However, it does cause inconvenience. We all know, and it has been well documented, the problems it causes for residents living in those areas. However, since rates are really determined by the capital value of properties, anything that causes capital

values to increase will, of course, enhance the rateable value of the houses.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that advice should be provided to tenants in the situation where a tenant pays the landlord rates, the rates are then due but the landlord does not pay LPS, and the tenants are then made liable for a second payment? Do you agree that more awareness needs to be created around tenants' rights on this issue?

Mr Wilson: It does. Again, that is an issue DSD needs to address, and would be more properly directed at the Social Development Minister. However, I will say that there are properties for which landlords have the obligation to collect the rent. They are given discounts for doing that service, and the landlord is ultimately responsible. Where there is a degree of ambiguity, it is important that tenants are made aware. I know that there is a review of some of the legislation. Maybe one thing we ought to place on landlords is an obligation to make it clear to tenants who is responsible for paying rates and who is not responsible.

Mr D McIlveen: Will the Minister tell us how he and his Department define HMOs?

Mr Wilson: It is not defined by my Department. It is defined under the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 2003, and it is where three or more qualifying people live in a house and are not of the same family. For them not to be of the same family, they must not be spouses, persons living together, husband, wife, parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, brothers or sisters. Therefore, where that relationship does not exist between three or more people living in a house, it is regarded as an HMO.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister tell the House the extent of the rates arrears in houses of multiple occupation?

Mr Wilson: I am afraid that I do not have that answer. I do not know if we even have the data broken down by sector like that, or whether the information is just held generally as the total arrears on domestic and non-domestic premises. I will seek to find out whether we have the figures broken down into sectors like that, and, if so, I will write to the Member.

Corporation Tax

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his negotiations with HM Treasury on the devolution of corporation tax. (AQO 2575/11-15)

10. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the devolution of corporation tax. (AQO 2580/11-15)

11. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on his discussions with the Secretary of State and HM Treasury in relation to devolving corporation tax. (AQO 2581/11-15)

Mr Wilson: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 5, 10 and 11 together.

The joint ministerial working group considering the devolution of responsibility for corporation tax to the Northern Ireland Executive is now, in my opinion, entering a critical stage in its deliberations. While some progress has been made in respect of how a devolved rate would operate in practice and in respect of the implementation timetable, I remain concerned about the cost currently proposed by Treasury officials, which I believe is prohibitively expensive. At the same time, I would like to reassure Members that I and my Executive colleagues on the working group remain fully committed to taking responsibility for corporation tax, while my strong belief is that the issues around cost can be addressed. However, that will depend to a large extent on the position adopted by the Secretary of State and the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, and, in particular, whether they are serious about supporting the Executive in rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy.

The working group is due to meet again on 18 October, with a view to resolving the outstanding issues. After that, I suspect that it really will be down to a political decision involving the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for the answer and for giving us an indication as to where this issue sits at the minute. Can he give us more detail on what he still sees as the areas of dispute that we have with the Treasury in regard to securing a settlement in this issue?

Mr Wilson: The areas of dispute are twofold. The first one is on the basic cost and what allowance can be made against the secondary

impacts of corporation tax. For example, if there are additional VAT, income tax, national insurance receipts, what proportion of those can stay in Northern Ireland?

The second thing is how the amount of tax that we pay to the Exchequer escalates year on year, and the escalator that is being proposed by the Treasury at present would make an assumption that corporation tax take in Northern Ireland will grow at twice the rate of corporation tax take in the rest of the United Kingdom. That is why the bill would escalate within 15 years to over £700 million. Again, I do not believe that that is an acceptable formula, and it is something that we still have to determine with the Treasury.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister agree that the urgency of dealing with the devolution of corporation tax powers must be an absolute priority for the Executive in light of the current economic climate and the business sector's crying need for something to incentivise and grow the local economy and to stimulate confidence in our local economy and help that small-business sector to grow and give a future to our young people.

Mr Wilson: I have said that I believe that we should force a decision either way on this issue in the autumn. It is critical for two reasons.

First, as the Member pointed out, we have grave economic difficulties. So if corporation tax devolution and a reduction in the rate can act as an incentive for inward investment and stimulate investment in firms operating in Northern Ireland, that is, of course, all to the good.

Secondly, Arlene Foster needs to have greater certainty when she talks to investors. Having dangled this fiscal worm in front of investors for so long, I think that it is time that she was able to give them a greater degree of certainty.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I listened to the Minister's response. Minister, given the clear problems you outlined with the calculations of the British Treasury regarding the transfer costs of corporation tax, do you agree that steps should be taken to establish a more accurate picture of the taxes generated in the North to ensure that we do not see a repeat of that situation in the future?

Mr Wilson: The generation of tax in Northern Ireland from various sources is a bit more

complicated than simply saying, "Look, this is the amount paid on that tax, and that is the amount paid on another tax", or whatever. In the case of corporation tax, there is tax that is generated by companies based and registered in Northern Ireland, as well as tax that is generated by companies operating in Northern Ireland but registered outside it, and tax that is generated by companies based in Northern Ireland but which have their earnings in other parts of the United Kingdom.

There are lots of different ways in which the matter can be complicated depending on which tax office the firms are registered with. Again, the origin of the tax might be more difficult to identify. That is why there have been considerable negotiations about the amount of tax generated. Of course, as well as that, we have argued that the devolution of corporation tax will generate additional tax revenues, some of which, we believe, should be retained in Northern Ireland.

Mr Cree: The Minister will be aware of the recession and the fact that the profits of major companies have declined. How satisfied is he that the figure that the Treasury is using has been updated and is not a historical figure?

Mr Wilson: We have said to the Treasury that we will not accept a figure that is based on one particular year because, depending on what happened that year, tax revenues could be higher or lower than average. The Treasury has accepted that. Therefore, we have sought to get an average figure over a number of years. On that basis, there can be a huge variation depending on which years are chosen.

We also said that it is not sufficient simply to look at the issue historically but that we have to look at it into the future. This is where there is even further complication. In the past, for example, about 40% of tax revenues in corporation tax were generated by banks. It is estimated that, because of bank losses and the way in which they can write off their losses against tax in the future, banks based in Northern Ireland will probably not pay tax for the next 10 years. That is where the calculations become complex.

People might get frustrated about the slowness of the process. However, one reason why it is so slow is that I do not think that anybody expects us simply to settle for the first figure that comes up. We have to look at all those issues and make sure that we get the best deal for Northern Ireland, because there will be consequences if we do not do so.

Land and Property Services: Rate Assessments

6. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the average length of time it takes Land and Property Services to carry out rate assessments on new houses and businesses. (AQO 2576/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Land and Property Services (LPS) is responsible for the assessment of rateable values and the subsequent determination of rate bills for new domestic and non-domestic properties. New properties can be valued only following the issue of a rating completion notice or if the property is already complete and occupied.

At the commencement of the current rating year, analysis of the workload in LPS showed that the average age of new domestic cases awaiting valuation was 53 calendar days, and the average age of new non-domestic cases awaiting valuation was 47 calendar days.

3.00 pm

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Tá mé ar lorg comhairle. I seek some advice. Will the Deputy Speaker confirm that the question for urgent oral answer that we are about to have now was submitted earlier, was not accepted initially and was subsequently accepted? I wonder whether we could be advised why a question that was not accepted initially was suddenly accepted. I look forward to the information on that. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is a question for the Speaker, who has made a determination. As Deputy Speaker, I offer the opportunity for that question for urgent oral answer to be put, as determined by the Speaker. The Member may wish to have a discussion with the Speaker in his office to resolve the issue.

Ms Ruane: On a further point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you ask the Speaker to formally come back to the House with an explanation? I am not questioning in any way the Speaker's advice, but I am — *[Interruption.]* Sorry, but I would like an answer. Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will ask the Speaker to come back to the Member.

Education

DE: Advertising

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Education what is the total cost to the public purse of advertisements under the title "Get Involved" which are about to be aired, in Irish only, on commercial television during the first week of October regarding access to education, and has advice been sought from the Departmental Solicitor's Office on whether the advert breaches the Communications Act 2003.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. Níl gné ar bith den fheachtas Is fearr i bhfad a éiríonn leis an oideachas nuair a bhíonn páirt agat féin ann a chuirfear ar aghaidh i nGaeilge amháin, toisc go bhfuil gach eilimint den fheachtas curtha ar aghaidh as Béarla chomh maith. No aspect of the Education Works campaign has been taken

forward in Irish only, as all parts of the campaign are also being taken forward in English. My Department's language policy states that any advertising undertaken by the Department is done "bilingually in Irish and English". The policy was written prior to the Department engaging in the campaign, and the decision to run the advertising in Irish is in keeping with departmental policy.

The campaign is part of my focus on addressing educational underachievement among young people, whether they are educated through the medium of Irish or the medium of English. A proportion of the campaign is conveyed in the medium of Irish, in keeping with the Department's statutory duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education. The Irish language advert comprises approximately 10% of the TV airtime and is a replica of the English version. Members may want to hold on to their seat as I give the cost. We have stopped the business of the day and brought this important matter to the Assembly. It was so urgent that it could not be dealt with through a question for written answer or any other way. So Members may want to sit back in their seat and absorb the cost: the cost of the television slots for the adverts to be aired in Irish during the first week of October is £4,360. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: That is what we have stopped Assembly business for.

The additional TV production cost for the Irish version of the advert was £4,293. So, for approximately £8,600, the Assembly has had to be stalled, all business set aside and government put on hold. Stop the presses: the Government are spending £8,000 on an equality measure.

The Irish version of the advertisement was submitted to Clearcast, which provides broadcasters with advice on compliance with the industry code of practice. No legal issues were raised — no legal issues — by either the broadcasters or Clearcast. Therefore, legal advice was not required or sought from the Departmental Solicitor's Office.

Mr Campbell: The ads are exclusively in Irish. Can the Minister outline the fact — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Campbell: Can he outline the fact that he is bound by the ministerial code? It states:

"Any matter which ... is significant or controversial ... should be considered by the Executive".

It also states:

"no expenditure can be properly incurred without the approval of the Department of Finance and Personnel."

Are both those positions an accurate depiction of the facts of the matter as they have occurred over the past few weeks?

Mr O'Dowd: I have acted in full compliance with the ministerial code. All Ministers have to comply with the ministerial code. The Member has not pointed out to me where I am in breach of the ministerial code. Perhaps I missed it. I have followed all the necessary processes and procedures in procuring the advertisement, which is now being broadcast in Irish and English. Although Mr Campbell may have nothing to do other than worrying about the expenditure of £8,000, I am sure that the public are saying, "I am sure that the Assembly has more important things to debate than the expenditure of £8,000". If the Member wishes to be more specific about the area of the ministerial code that I have breached — in Irish or English — I am more than happy to answer the question. To date, he has not done so.

I am, however, concerned about one matter that I will bring to the attention of the head of the Civil Service. There appears to have been a leak from the Department of Finance and Personnel to the Member with regard to confidential — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr O'Dowd: — confidential material from one Minister to another. Perhaps Mr Campbell would like to take the opportunity to tell the House where he came upon the confidential information that he referred to in his statement and on the airwaves this morning. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, can I ask for good temper and moderation in all that you do, please?

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Before I comment on the issues for the Committee, I should say that I find it strange that Members on the

opposite Benches really get annoyed when a matter such as this is brought to light.

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

Mr Storey: It ill becomes Members on the opposite Benches to be worried about spies, given their track record, and sources and leaks — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Storey: Honestly. Kettle — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. Mr Storey, can we have a question, please? If not, we will move on.

Mr Storey: Yes. We will start again, Mr Deputy Speaker.

On 19 September, the Education Committee received correspondence from the Department that referred to the Get Involved programme. I was surprised to discover that nowhere did the Department's letter of 14 September refer to the fact that some of the broadcasts of some of the advertisements would be exclusively in Irish. Given that relevant information was not brought out into the light, was the Minister also trying to mislead the Education Committee?

Mr O'Dowd: Why would I have to inform the Education Committee that an advert is being broadcast in English and Irish? Members on the opposite Benches will have to understand that the Irish language is part of everyday life for thousands of people in the North of Ireland. Thousands of pupils attend Irish-medium schools every day, and thousands of pupils have graduated from those schools and are now productive members of our society. As I stated previously on the airwaves, Irish language speakers pay tax; therefore, they have rights. I do not see any reason why I would have to define whether a campaign will be broadcast in Irish or English. I write to the Committee about numerous matters, so does the Member suggest that I should state whether I used Irish or maybe English somewhere in those letters? The advertising campaign is an advertising campaign. Sin é. That is it. It is an advertising campaign, regardless of what language it is broadcast in.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí go dtí seo. An dtig leis an Aire insint dúinn an ndeachaigh sé i

gcomhairle leis an Ard-Aighne maidir leis an cheist seo?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that we would like an English translation. *[Interruption.]* Order. Order. Please, Members.

Mr Sheehan: Gabh mo leithscéal, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg your pardon, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will try to use both languages. I thank the Minister for his answers up until now. Will he tell us whether he has been in consultation with the Attorney General on the matter?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. Yes, I have been in communication with the Attorney General with regard to this matter. I am concerned at the content of the communication from the Minister of Finance and Personnel, and I intend to share the advice that I have received from the Attorney General with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I do not know whether I should give that to Mr Campbell to pass to DFP or give it directly to the Department. I will pass it directly to DFP, and Mr Campbell might get a copy of it. I may not be quoting the old saying correctly, but I am always of the view that, if you act in haste, you regret at your leisure. I intend not to act in haste but to respond to the Finance Minister in due course with the Attorney General's point of view.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members about the need for good temper and moderation on all sides of the Chamber.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his response. With his argument that he needs to cater for minority languages only standing up, can he demonstrate that he is treating equally all minority languages, such as Mandarin, Cantonese and Polish? Will he spend £8,000 on advertisements in those languages?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member should familiarise himself with the Good Friday Agreement and the provisions in it that relate to the Irish language. He should also look at the 1998 Act that flowed from the Good Friday Agreement and familiarise himself with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. When he does that, he will be aware that Irish has a specific and legislative place in our society and that I am exercising all my duties responsibly. I have no Mandarin, Polish or Ulster-Scots schools under my jurisdiction. Thousands of our people speak Irish, and I doubt seriously whether the unionist community is represented on this issue by its political

leadership. I feel that it is perhaps more broad-minded and more receptive to the use of the Irish language than the elected representatives in the Chamber.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Sílim féin gur maith ann do na fógraí seo, agus cuirim fáilte ó chroí rompu. Chan fhaca mé go fóill iad, ach tá mé ag dúil go mór anois lena bhfeiceáil.

I welcome the advertisements. I have not seen them as yet, and I am grateful to Mr Campbell for drawing our attention to them. I will certainly watch them now, as will even more people.

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

Mr D Bradley: You can, agus fáilte. An mbeadh an tAire sásta macasamhail a fhógra a chur amach le buanna na Gaelscolaíochta go háirithe a chur faoi bhráid an phobail? Will the Minister consider commissioning a series of advertisements to extol the virtues of Irish-medium education in accordance with the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste.

The advertising campaign that I am involved in is about encouraging our entire society to value education. As I said, thousands of young people go through Irish-medium schools. We have a duty to promote and facilitate Irish-medium education as we have in relation to integrated education. I thought that, in this specific instance, it was right and proper that the adverts were broadcast in Irish as well.

I would have to take on board the suggestion of a campaign on Irish-medium education and investigate it further to see whether there are any merits in going to television or broadcast ads on that matter. I have no plans to do so at this time, but I plan to continue with the Valuing Education campaign. Over this year and further years, that will develop the message that we want to send out to the community that it is important to be involved in your young people's education, whether you are the parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle or older sibling. Those ads will continue to be broadcast in both English and Irish.

Mr Allister: Despite the "Get Involved" misnomer, it is clear that the Minister's pluralist mask has slipped today and what we see again is the same old "Ourselves Alone" mantra.

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

Mr Allister: Why is the Minister using children and misusing public money to peddle a political agenda, which this clearly is? From his answers already, it is clear that he has no interest in reaching Polish parents or Chinese parents, he simply wants to make a political point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has asked his question.

Mr Allister: Why is he abusing his office for that purpose?

3.15 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist a chur.

The Member is quite familiar with the Good Friday Agreement. He has studied it at length. If the Members opposite are to be believed, you actually advised that party to go into power sharing with Sinn Féin on the basis of the Good Friday Agreement, so you should know the detail of it. I am sure that you have studied the paragraph about having respect for the Irish language.

Nothing has slipped here today. I am not using or abusing anyone in this matter. The Irish language is a part of our society. It is not going to go away, and, as I said earlier, I believe —
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Members, can we have order, please?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said earlier, if my colleague Carál Ní Chuilín's campaign on Líofo is a measure of this matter, many more unionists are more open to the Irish language than their political representatives in this Chamber. I welcome that very much.

Employment and Learning

JJB Sports: Job Losses

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures are in place to protect and advise those people affected by the job losses announced yesterday at JJB Sports.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Following yesterday's announcement regarding the closure of 10 JJB Sports stores in Northern Ireland, my officials have made contact with the administrator, KPMG, primarily to offer support to the employees who have been made redundant. KPMG has advised that the three stores, in Antrim, Lisburn and Londonderry, have been sold to Sports Direct, retaining 65 jobs. Of the 164 employees of the 10 stores, in Ballymena, Bangor, Coleraine, Craigavon, Derry, Newry, Newtownards and the three in Belfast, 154 have been made redundant immediately. Ten employees are currently assisting the administrator with the closure of the stores.

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

KPMG is writing to each of the redundant employees tomorrow and has agreed to incorporate details of the redundancy advice service offered through my Department's employment service. My officials will subsequently gauge the interest from the employees and will organise redundancy clinics on a regional basis if necessary.

The redundancy advice service is delivered by my Department in partnership with other Departments and agencies such as the Social Security Agency, Invest Northern Ireland, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults and HM Revenue and Customs. Employees are provided with a tailored package of information and professional advice about the options and support available. This includes employment, training and education opportunities, careers advice and advice on a range of other issues such as benefits, taxation and money management.

The Department's network of 35 jobs and benefits offices and jobcentres has been alerted to the situation.

Mr Flanagan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sé dúinn. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister

for the answers he has given us. The Assembly will note that this is an urgent question of an important nature and not a divisive issue such as we saw tabled previously.

I thank the Minister for his proactive work on this issue. Is he satisfied that the redundancy advice service that he mentioned is fit for purpose, or does it need to be tailored to suit the needs of those who happen to find themselves recently out of work?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Flanagan for both the original question and his supplementary question. Without passing judgement on the previous debate, I concur with him that this is a very important issue and that the livelihoods of a number of people are severely affected by it.

My service is certainly fit for purpose, although, of course, it is coming under considerable pressure at the moment, because there have been a number of redundancies. There is pressure on the staff, but they are rising to that challenge, and they recognise the importance of what they are doing.

In moving forward, the important thing is to work with employees who find themselves in this situation and ensure that we can invest in having their existing skills properly recognised, invest in new skills and reskilling and put them in contact with other job opportunities that may be available in the retail sector. Although the sector is under considerable pressure at present and the Executive are doing a lot to support the sector, particularly on the issue of rates, there are nevertheless vacancies in retail and associated activities, and other companies have contacted my Department to make it known that they have vacancies and are potentially interested in taking on some of the affected employees.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Basil McCrea, the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. *[Interruption.]*

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): Every so often you get surprised, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I must do this again. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: Regrettably, it has been forecast that unemployment will rise, and we may subsequently see more people in the unfortunate position of those whom we are

talking about today. There is, however, a question about the efficacy of the support that we give them. How will the Minister reassure the House that we are doing more than just paying lip service to the people who are going through these processes and that we are able to deliver real advice and advantage in the hope of getting them back into work at this difficult time?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his questions and comments. Obviously, the unemployment situation in Northern Ireland is very serious, and we have had ongoing problems over the past five or six years. I certainly hope that the situation will stabilise very soon and that, through a range of initiatives operated by my Department or by colleagues, we will see the situation changing.

We are now in a situation where the number of people who are in work is increasing. There are three factors to bear in mind: those who are in work in the labour market; those who are unemployed; and those who are at the level of economic inactivity, which is coming down — that is something, of course, that we welcome.

On the theme of whether the redundancy advice service is doing enough, rather than just paying lip service, let me stress that we are being very proactive in engaging in these redundancy situations. We are offering clinics where we will actually go out and work with the employees affected.

Members will recall that we offered a similar service in relation to FG Wilson, and we offer that type of in relation to the JJB Sports redundancies, albeit on a regional basis.

Rather than waiting for the employees affected to come into a jobs and benefits office, we are prepared to go out and meet them to provide them with the information. It is a joined-up service that encompasses other agencies. That is only one aspect of what we can do as a Department.

I stress to the Committee Chair what I said to Mr Flanagan about the importance of considering what existing skills those workers may have and seeing what we can do to place them in other job vacancies and opportunities.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for coming to the House. Any announcement of redundancies is to be regretted. We trust that we will not have to do it too often. As regards this specific announcement, Ballymena in my

own constituency has been affected, along with towns such as Bangor and other places.

In relation to Ballymena, can the Minister give us an assurance that the redundancy advice service has not only the clinic but the right connections with, for example, the Northern Regional College, where there may be other avenues open to those who had been employed to get further training? That, in its own right, would open up opportunities for other employment.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and for taking me down that avenue. It is important to stress that we invest in both the accreditation of people's skills and retraining, where appropriate. The Northern Regional College, for example, is very willing in that regard. It has been in discussions with FG Wilson about what it can do to assist with the reskilling of those workers. While it is early days and we have not yet had those conversations, I am sure that the FE sector will be very willing to rise to the challenge. Members appreciate that FE is a very broad sector and has a lot of flexibility in the type of provision that it can make.

I also stress the point that there are a lot of people who work in retail who do not have formal qualifications but may have skills and experience. They have learnt on the job how to interact with customers and are able to perform those jobs to very high standards. It is important that we translate that knowledge, experience and training into some type of accredited qualification. Other employees will measure people's standard of attainment in that way rather than simply relying on word of mouth, which can be very subjective. I see a particular role for the FE sector to make those interventions where appropriate.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I join other Members in expressing concern at the closure of JJB Sports and sympathy for those who have lost their jobs. Fifteen of those people are in Derry, and many of them are young. Given the horrific youth unemployment statistic for the Foyle constituency, which was recently revealed as being at around 17%, does the Minister have any specific plans for that region?

Dr Farry: The Member will be very much aware that we had a major event last Wednesday to showcase our youth employment scheme, which has been approved and, indeed, resourced by the Executive. I welcome the fact that a number of Members joined us for that

event, including the Committee Chair and the Member's colleague Mr Ramsey. That programme has now been rolled out across all of Northern Ireland.

We have different opportunities available for young people, ranging from short taster work experience through to longer work experiences of six to nine months. There is also the prospect of the availability of wage subsidies to employers who are prepared to offer young people employment. Retail will be covered by the scheme. It falls into the skill sets that we have set aside for the longer periods of work experience.

It is important that we make particular interventions in respect of youth unemployment, because a particular concentration of our overall unemployment figures falls in the 18- to 24-year-old age bracket. While youth unemployment is an issue right across the Western World, Northern Ireland has its own unique situation, and we must find our own particular solutions. I am certainly committed to pursuing those, and I know that the rest of the Executive and Assembly joins me in that commitment.

Mr Lyttle: I, too, extend my thoughts to everyone affected by the job losses announced at JJB Sports. Would it be possible for Department for Employment and Learning officials to meet affected employees in the constituency offices of elected representatives in the affected areas? What particular reskilling opportunities might be available for those people?

3.30 pm

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for that question. We are keen to offer a flexible approach, and I would not rule out one-to-one engagement in constituency offices, but my strong preference would be to work through the clinics, the majority of which should be available on a regional basis across Northern Ireland.

We are committed to working with people regarding skilling and reskilling. One of the first things that we will have to do over the coming days is to get a clear picture from the administrator as to who precisely is being made redundant and what their particular skill sets may be. On the back of that information, we will be able to draw conclusions as to the most appropriate types of intervention to assist those individuals in reskilling and having their existing experience and training properly accredited. I

will ensure that those conversations take place over the next couple of days.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. In his preamble, the Member who tabled the question for urgent oral answer indicated the seriousness of the issue. However, he left the Chamber as soon as his question had been answered and was not here to listen to questions from other Members and the answers to them. Is it in order for a Member to table a question for urgent oral answer and then treat the House with such contempt?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member asked a question and waited for the answer before leaving. Obviously, we encourage Members to stay for all the debates on all the issues. Across the Floor, there is varying adherence to that. We have had the questions and answers, and that is the important issue.

Assembly Business

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Will you ascertain the Speaker's guidance on a situation in which a Member tables a question for urgent oral answer, and, during an exchange with an Executive Minister, asks for specific and accurate replies to questions about whether significant or controversial matters were discussed at the Executive table but a response is not forthcoming? What should a Member do if he does not get replies to questions?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member knows that that is not a point of order to start off with. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Campbell: There was no answer.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, order. Let us not have a conversation across the Floor. I am giving you the answer.

Mr Campbell: So, no answer.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Campbell. The Minister replies in the way the Minister decides.

Mr Campbell: No answer.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, Mr Campbell.

Private Members' Business

Schools: Absenteeism

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

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is responsible for co-ordinating the work of the Executive and for children and young people's issues; notes the high levels of pupil absenteeism in primary and post-primary schools in many communities, and in particular, the high levels in areas identified by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency as being predominantly Protestant; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that an integrated approach to identifying the causes of absenteeism is adopted by all relevant Departments and appropriate action is taken, in conjunction with parents or guardians, to enable more young people to reach their full potential.

I am pleased that this important issue is being discussed in the Assembly today. Given my family history, I recognise the importance of education in enabling everyone to reach for the opportunities that are available to them.

My dad was one of 12 children who were reared in a two-up, two-down terraced house on the Rashee Road in Ballyclare. Needless to say, their upbringing was far from affluent. Dad was fortunate to have a supportive family, which had a strong Christian belief and valued education and hard work. That had enabled all the members of the family to contribute to society and be gainfully employed throughout their lifetime.

For a number of years, I have been posing Assembly questions to highlight the significant number of children and young people with less than 85% attendance at school, the point at which they are referred to an education welfare officer. Many children are missing more than one day in seven and falling significantly behind in the classroom because of that. This, in turn, can lead to low self-esteem, and it increases the likelihood that students will drop out of

school and end up not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Charles Taylor, Her Majesty's Government's Westminster expert adviser on behaviour, states in his recent report on improving attendance at school:

"There is a clear link between poor attendance at school and lower academic achievement. Of pupils who miss more than 50 per cent of school only three per cent manage to achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A to C including Maths and English. 73 per cent of pupils who have over 95 per cent attendance achieve five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C."*

Clearly, addressing high levels of absenteeism should be a priority as we strive to improve educational attainment for all our young children.

There is a problem in a particular part of our community. The lower educational attainment of Protestant working-class boys has been highlighted for some time as being a problem, but it is now evident that there is a major contributing factor: corresponding high absenteeism.

In March 2012, RSM McClure Watters published a paper on behalf of the Department of Education, entitled 'Research into Improving Attendance in Schools Serving Deprived Areas'. This report failed to acknowledge the issue of absenteeism, so, unsurprisingly, none of the recommendations specifically addressed it. From my analysis of answers to Assembly questions and through linking up with the Northern Ireland Research and Statistics Agency (NISRA), I have identified that, in post-primary education, 26 of the 30 wards with the highest rates of absenteeism are, according to NISRA, predominantly Protestant. Of the other four, two are mixed and two are predominantly Roman Catholic. In fact, I have been advised that I may have underestimated that.

Such a significant trend must be of concern to us all. Absenteeism will reduce the likelihood of employment and increase the risk of becoming involved in antisocial activity. Just like the inner city deprived areas in Great Britain, we are at risk from a gang culture. We may well have experienced a recent manifestation of it.

The Minister of Education frequently blames grammar schools for poor outcomes, but how can that be the case when schools such as Ashfield Boys' High School have been so successful? What are the causes and the

solution? Are the schools managing absenteeism sufficiently well?

This year, I visited a number of post-primary schools in my constituency. Carrickfergus College is adjacent to three of the wards that show the highest absenteeism. I was impressed by the use of modern technology to monitor attendance. It also enabled automatic text messaging to parents when unaccounted absences occurred. A report was also available for the education welfare officer to help her in her work and to track down young people who were not attending.

Under new principal, Hedley Webb, the school is also extending its links with the local community and increasing parental engagement. Anyone who attended last year's prize-giving will have been impressed by the achievements of the young people in a school that is succeeding and by the healthy relationship between staff, pupils and appreciative parents. It appears to me that this school was addressing any absenteeism issues that were under its control. This has strengthened my view that other Departments must also play a role.

I recall visiting a primary school where the children behaved exemplarily. When I asked the principal whether there were problems with absenteeism, I was told that the children loved coming to school but that some of the parents had personal problems that could impact on their children. It is clear to me that social services and the health service can play a role in improving school attendance through addressing such issues.

I wish now to focus on the Action for Children report on the northern area early intervention project 2010-11. The project supported children aged between 8 and 13 who were vulnerable to offending and antisocial behaviour, and it worked with their families. It involved collaborative working alongside the PSNI youth diversion officer and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) specialist nurse. Rather than spending hundreds of thousands of pounds imprisoning young offenders, the project involved supporting parents through a Strengthening Families course. Quotations in that report said things such as, "If it were not for you, he would not have gone back to school." There is a lesson for the future. We must invest more in that. However, I have been advised that the method of funding for that project has resulted in uncertainty for the funding and the job and has created recruitment problems.

Funding has also proven to be a problem with the west Belfast and greater Shankill's Integrated Services for Children and Young People programme. The funding for that has stumbled from crisis to crisis. Last week, employees were closing down their clients to emotional scenes from appreciative parents. Some staff have already moved on. Just before the door was to be finally closed on Friday, a call was received to indicate that a reprieve had been given. However, there have been no precise details and no communication in writing, and there is great uncertainty. We should not be surprised that, in such situations, staff move on because they do not know how they will pay the mortgage in coming weeks and months. There needs to be certainty and a much greater level of job security whenever people are tackling those difficult issues in deprived communities.

The problem of absenteeism first manifests itself as early as the primary school. The figures for absenteeism in primary education show that, in some wards, up to 20% of young people are referred to their educational welfare officer. If my kids were not going to school, I know what would happen: they would be there, I would know and it would be sorted. We need that to happen in all cases, and, if there are difficulties at home, they should be resolved so that everyone can value education. I have become involved in Sure Start, because I recognise that improving parenting support and giving educational advice in the very early years is so important.

I want to learn more about when a family nurse practitioner service will be available in my constituency. There has been a successful pilot in the Western Board area, and we now have two more pilots. Why are those not being widened to address the problem? We need multiagency working from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and we need the Department of Education, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Justice to all work together to address the issue.

I have also learned that the Better Reading Partnership and book bodies have suffered with funding. Through those schemes, volunteers can be brought in to assist children who are having difficulty with reading, and, with that one-to-one support, there can be improvement.

Recently, paramilitary loan sharks have been creating an ongoing issue in my community. It has been reported to me that mothers can be

left with no money to put food on the table and children can be put out to school with, perhaps, no breakfast. That is a modern day form of slavery. How can parents and children concentrate on their education? We need a cohesive community with the removal of loan sharks and drug dealers, who are corrupting our youth. The community needs to work with the police to bring those parasites to court.

There have been some positive recent developments in the Castlemara estate. Just last night, I attended a community association that has re-emerged with the help of the Housing Executive's BRIC programme. That project is being driven by women in the community, which is to be greatly welcomed.

In summary, we need all public bodies to work closely with the voluntary and community sector to address the poor attendance at our schools

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

Mr Beggs: — and the corresponding educational underachievement. We need everyone to value education and to recognise that, although education cannot guarantee a job, it will improve the likelihood of finding one.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will make comments first as the Chair of the Education Committee and then as a Member.

The Committee received a departmental briefing on 15 December 2011 in response to the Committee's report from the previous mandate on what constitutes successful post-primary schools in disadvantaged areas. There was also a response to the report that resulted from Dawn Purvis's work on educational disadvantage among Protestant working-class boys. The Committee considered many different aspects of the Department's response and sought further information on a number of the issues, including attendance.

3.45 pm

The Committee is well aware of the higher levels of school absence in disadvantaged areas and the importance of regular attendance if pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged areas, are to engage fully with the educational experiences that are on offer. The Committee will continue to follow up with the Department of Education to look into the role of schools in promoting better attendance and the

importance of interface — among schools, support services, homes and the community in deprived areas — in promoting regular attendance at school.

I will now comment as a private Member and the DUP's spokesperson on education. I welcome the fact that the Member has brought the matter to the House and commend him for his persistence in repeatedly asking questions. Despite all the shortcomings in the answers that you get many a time, that proves that if you ask and keep asking, you will be able to get relevant information.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Member for giving way. I have to admit that I received a very detailed answer, but I had to go to the Library to get it. It was not provided electronically without request, and it would be much better if the figures were easily available in the public domain so that everyone was aware of them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has another minute.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his comment and agree with him. The question for urgent oral answer on advertising in the Irish language proves that when you keep asking questions and keep pressing people on particular issues, you can bring all sorts of things out into the light.

Here is the sad reality, however: here we go again. We have all the data, reports, information and history. We can all stand up in the House and cite the reports that have been published, by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the Department of Education. This is not a new problem but one that has been around for many years. The question that we have to ask in the House today is: what has been done to address the problem? We are not seeing a decline in the issue, or its being taken so seriously that there has been real and meaningful change. That is what begs the question.

We are repeatedly told that a number of policies are in place. "We have a suite of policies" is the phrase used, and it will probably be used again today. All those policies are said to be interwoven and about bringing about change. One of the biggest difficulties is that the education welfare office system in every one of the education and library boards in Northern Ireland has been almost decimated because of a departmental policy.

Since 2006, the Department has operated a vacancy control policy, which has left the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS), the education welfare service and many other services in our education system that are under the authority of the boards in a very dire place. That has contributed to the pressure of work that is placed on those members of staff and the absence of members of staff to deal with absent pupils. Therefore, the problem is not just one of pupils not going to school but of members of staff who are no longer there to be able to deal effectively with the issue.

However, there are examples of where good work is being done. That is the point that I want to get to. There are examples of full-service delivery models, such as the Boys' Model School in north Belfast. There, good work is being done, an inter-agency approach is being taken and there is a very clear focus. Particularly in working-class Protestant areas, a difference is being made because of the model put in place.

I agree with the Member about using pilots, but here is the other issue. The current Minister of Education received a good pilot, Achieving Belfast, which brought about good success. The Education Committee has received a number of reports to indicate clearly that the gap is closing between pupils in those schools and schools in other sectors across the education system. What does the Minister tell us in correspondence? He tells us that he has no intention of rolling this programme out across Northern Ireland, but, then, mysteriously, we discover that £0.5 million is going to be provided for another project in Belfast that will deal with the absenteeism issue.

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

Mr Storey: So, the question that has to be asked of the Minister in the debate is this: what policy will be put in place to deal with this issue effectively and to stop playing around the edges?

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I agree with the sentiment behind the motion, and I share the view outlined previously that we require an integrated approach if we are to continue to lower levels of absenteeism in our schools.

I think that the vast majority of us would accept that the reasons for pupil absenteeism are

multi-causal. Most of the Members who will speak today will allude to the array of factors involved in the debates surrounding the causal factors of absenteeism. However, there can be little doubt that at the centre of the debate is a recognition that we must examine and develop how families and, indeed, communities perceive and value education.

Recently, Minister O'Dowd introduced the family education strategy, which is aimed at engaging families in their children's education at home and subsequently enhancing their participation in the learning process. That is exactly the type of integrated, imaginative approach that is required to deal with pupil absenteeism.

The strategy encourages parents to participate fully in a child's education and sets out simple steps that will make a huge difference to a child's educational development, both at home and in the classroom. Perhaps at the heart of such an issue is the idea that young people's learning does not start or stop at the school gates. As a society, we have a responsibility to ensure that we help to encourage and nurture our children's appetite for learning, be it in the classroom, the living room or, indeed, the garden.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I am glad that he used the word "nurture", because that is clearly a very important word. There are examples of nurture classes in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland nurture association was launched in Londonderry last week, and I had the privilege of attending that launch. However, that is an issue that the current Minister and his Department have decided to just pay lip service to because they do not see it as being of real importance. On the one hand, you say that nurturing is valuable, but, on the other hand, as far as the Minister is concerned, it is not valuable in our education system.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for his intervention. As far as I am aware, no decision has been made on that, so it is wrong to presuppose what someone will do.

I go back to my original point; it is the partnership approach involving teachers, pupils and families that can help to play a huge role in continuing to increase not just school attendance levels but the benefits that stem from regular and sustained participation. There is little doubt that regular school attendance and educational attainment are intimately linked. Regular attendance not only ensures that pupils get the best possible outcomes from their compulsory education but it undoubtedly

improves their chances of employment and life opportunities in the longer term.

Overall, school attendance has remained fairly consistent over the past five years, with the figure for primary schools at around 95% and the figure for post-primary schools at around 93%. However, those overall figures perhaps mask a more inherent problem in specific communities and areas. There can be little doubt that there remains a clear link between deprivation and absenteeism, and, consequently, there is an obligation on various Departments and agencies to examine effective solutions to the issue. To that end, the Education Minister recently commissioned research into improving pupil attendance in schools that service areas of social deprivation. Where strategies that have proved successful in tackling absenteeism are identified, they will subsequently be taken forward and developed as best practice guidance to be rolled out across all schools.

It is important, too, to acknowledge the ongoing work of the education welfare service (EWS), which continues to support schools through proactive advice and policy and the outworking of attendance strategies. The service is also empowered to take a parent to court when a child —

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hazzard: Yes.

Mr Swann: The Member mentioned the EWS. Has he any guidance for, or can the Minister give any advice to, the education and library boards that are having problems filling the education welfare officer (EWO) positions?

Mr Hazzard: Thank you very much for that point. I will let the Minister come back to you later with that information.

The continued work of the service is vital to the lowering of pupil absenteeism levels, and, indeed, it is good news that last year's figures for pupils referred to the education welfare service were indeed down by 7%. So, good work is being done by various bodies, but we undoubtedly have to do more and improve further.

There is a responsibility on all of us as political leaders, community members and family members to ensure that the significance of participation and engagement resonates with our young people and that they are aware not only of the value of the learning process in itself

but of the lifetime opportunities that stem from it.

Before I finish, I want to pick up on one point that was raised. Indeed, it is a very important point about educational underachievement by Protestant boys from socially deprived working-class areas. For some years, Sinn Féin has been highlighting the fact that working-class Protestant boys are the demographic most failed by the education arrangements — indeed, the same education arrangements that the unionist representatives have fought vehemently to retain.

I hope that the issue surrounding the motion can maybe help move forward those who seem so entrenched in idealising the past. The old education regime failed our young people in so many different ways, with high levels of absenteeism at its very core. Indeed, it is no wonder so many stayed away when you consider a recent Queen's University study that found that the old system made children feel "stupid and physically sick".

We have consistently argued the case for real and positive change in our education system and for the need to cherish all our children equally. That is why we have put an end to the 11-plus. That is why we have brought forward strategies aimed at making every school a good school.

It is incumbent upon all of us to ensure that we foster educational values in our homes and in our communities. Children should never have any cause — or should never again have any cause — to want to stay at home because they feel stupid or physically sick.

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

Mr Hazzard: I support the motion.

Mr Rogers: I support the motion. When a parent or carer supports a child in ensuring that they attend school regularly, the child takes an important step towards reaching their full potential and is given the best opportunity to learn new things and develop skills. When problems occur, the key to a successful resolution is re-engaging the child through collaborative working between the parent, the school and the local authority.

Absenteeism is not a problem just in the Protestant community or in urban areas but right across our community and the North. It is particularly a problem in areas where the

community do not see a big value in education. This perception can come from many places. It may be due to parents having a bad school experience themselves. Or, in the past when work was plentiful, people just went straight from school into the shipyard or the factory, or, in the rural areas, went straight into construction, farming or fishing. If bad habits are allowed to develop, the longer you delay the intervention, the more difficult it is to resolve.

In early years, there is no nationally collected attendance data for children attending nursery, playschool or reception. So, in many cases, if bad attendance habits have been allowed to develop in that setting, it may be too late by the time they reach compulsory school age. Children with poor attendance in a preschool setting are more likely to come from poorer backgrounds. They are likely to be behind their peers, especially in language acquisition and social development. If they fail to succeed early in their school career, they get disillusioned, behavioural problems are likely to develop, and they are likely to get excluded or just not to go to school.

A recent newspaper report stated that the number of persistent absentees in P1 to P4 has risen by 45% in three years. Parents of children in this group would admit to keeping their children off school for quite trivial reasons while others believe our children are too young when they start school — Northern Ireland having the earliest compulsory school age in Europe.

By the time children reach secondary school, it becomes more difficult for parents and schools to get the non-attenders to school. The majority of children whose parents are taken to court for bad attendance are in year 10 and year 11. By that time, it is usually too late. Indeed, like all aspects of education, early intervention is the key. There is a strong correlation between poor attendance and a high percentage on the free school meals index. There is a need for nurture programmes in areas with high levels of deprivation so the school can work with the children, their parents and the community to address the problem. Very often, the parents' own experience of school is likely to influence examples of school behaviour and the learning that they model in their child.

Based on extensive research into improving attendance in deprived areas, it is apparent that there is no single solution to the problem of poor attendance in schools. There are a number of themes that point to a range of strategies and interventions that can be applied

to help promote good attendance and address poor attendance.

I pay credit to all the hard-working school staff who go that extra mile to encourage children to attend school: our inspirational teachers. They introduce rewards and incentives; maybe a nurture room in the school; they have a breakfast club, an after-school club, a lunch club; maybe some counselling; or maybe even flexible timetabling to help reintegrate children.

4.00 pm

I had cause to visit a school refuser recently — a six-year-old boy with severe ADHD, and his poor mother could not get him assessed. After constant pressure from the mother and the school, the board decided to begin the process. Advice is being requested from the mother, the school principal, the designated medical officer and the board's psychology service. That is to be completed by the end of October.

At that time, the board will decide the degree of the child's difficulties and the nature of the provision necessary to meet the child's needs. If it is decided to statement the child, he will receive a formal statement of special educational needs by the end of January, at which time a programme will be put in place — five months into the school year. Meanwhile, the mother will have a constant battle to get the child to school, and the school principal will be similarly stressed as she tries to meet the needs of the child and not forget about the rest of the class. Here we have a board working very slowly with a severely understaffed educational psychology service. The child is not attending school and everyone is getting totally frustrated. One can only guess what that situation will be like at the end of January.

Looked-after children and school refusers who enter the EOTAS programme — Education Other than at School — are well cared for.

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

Mr Rogers: Yesterday, we spoke about the review of GCSEs and A levels. In every education debate in the Chamber, it comes back to the one big problem: numeracy and literacy.

Finally, I thank the Members who tabled the motion. As the proposer said, we need a joined-up approach here in the Assembly —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time.

Mr Rogers: — we need active partnerships developed between the school, the board and home, and early intervention is the key. As Members said, we need more nurture programmes and more good programmes such as EOTAS.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion and thank the Members who tabled it for securing this debate. From the Alliance Party's point of view, we believe that children would benefit not just from an integrated approach to identifying the cause of absenteeism but an integrated approach to the delivery of the entire education system, an improved method of pupil transfer, and industry-relevant curriculum and careers guidance. Indeed, I hope that the Department for Employment and Learning's guided NEETs strategy will help to deliver improvements in some of those areas.

Absenteeism is a serious problem, and it is of serious concern that we have seen a 45% increase in the number of children aged between four and seven who are missing more than 30 days of school each year. It has also been of serious ongoing concern that statistics highlight a particular problem for young people from a Protestant background in working-class areas who have a particularly high level of absenteeism and that attendance rates are generally lower in schools that have high numbers of pupils in receipt of free school meals. Undoubtedly, therefore, there is a relationship between disadvantage, absenteeism and attainment, and we have known for some time that more must be done to address the issue.

The failure to attend school is a serious issue for any young person, and it can, as Members have said, have a lasting impact on a pupil's confidence and his or her employability prospects long into adult life. Educational achievement can also have a fundamental impact on the wider community and limit our task to build a knowledge-based economy here in Northern Ireland.

The reasons for failing to attend school can be varied and can include complex reasons such as illness, disengagement or, indeed, such responsibilities as caring for a family member. As the causes are complex, the response must be comprehensive. As has been mentioned, that requires a full-service co-ordinated response across government and across agencies. OFMDFM is responsible for children and young people, and I agree with the proposer of the motion that it is well placed to co-ordinate a joined-up approach and the co-ordination of departmental budgets to maximise

the efficiency and effectiveness of funding for interventions on the issue.

It is clear from research that early identification of those at risk is essential to enable early intervention. Schools, obviously, have a key role to play in that challenge, and it is vital that the Department of Education provides guidelines of best practice to help schools that are working hard to effectively monitor attendance. Many schools and teachers in Northern Ireland are delivering innovative solutions to increasing attendance. I join my colleague in expressing our regard for the hard work of teachers across Northern Ireland, particularly in the Belfast Model School for Girls, for example, which has an attendance co-ordinator to offer one-to-one pupil support on attendance and an intergenerational project to encourage pupils to attend school.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he join me in expressing concern that the integrated service to which he refers, which operates in the Girls' Model and the Boys' Model, is under threat because of a funding issue and that that needs to be addressed so that the service can continue in that area of Belfast?

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

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention; he raises a strong point. We have to find ways to secure funding for those full service models if we are to tackle those issues.

It is vital that we do more to increase parental engagement and family involvement in children's education from an early age. Parental involvement is an explicit goal for the government policy, Every School a Good School, and the Department of Education and OFMDFM must work together to deliver long-term projects across Northern Ireland that facilitate and support parental engagement in a child's education.

I recently had the privilege of visiting that type of work at the excellent Barnardo's Ready to Learn programme at Avoniel Primary School in east Belfast. The way in which dedicated tutors on that programme are engaging children in after-school work and equipping parents to become more confident and involved in their children's reading and writing at home is fantastic. I hope that that type of project can be supported on a more long-term basis. Extended schools programmes improve children's and parents' engagement, confidence

and skills, and they raise aspirations to attend and do well at school. I have seen that at first hand in that project.

On an issue as important as the education of our children and young people, it is imperative that Departments work together to deliver better outcomes for all our children and young people. I am happy to support the motion.

I will close with one point. The educational underachievement of working-class Protestant boys in areas of high social deprivation was raised. It is of particular concern that the OFMDFM social investment fund appears to be underspent to the tune of £27 million when, in fact, it is meant to create and facilitate partnership approaches to tackling deprivation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Please bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Lyttle: Perhaps the Minister can speak to that today.

Mr Craig: We in the Assembly must never underestimate the role that education plays in the way in which our future generations will continue to follow full-time education. We have listened to the doom and gloom here, but there are those who go through our primary and secondary education systems in all the deprived areas who have exemplary attendance records.

Like many other Members, I am sure, I attend prize-givings, and it never ceases to amaze me how someone can be in education for seven years and never miss one single day. I have to be honest and say that I was not one of those pupils. When I was a youngster, I was plagued with health problems, and I would probably fit under the absentee figures that are being discussed today.

I have participated, along with Barnardo's and the Resurgent group, in looking at underachievement in the Lagan valley area. A startling figure in Barnardo's research is that if pupils are absent for more than 10% of their educational time, the likelihood of their achieving five GCSEs, including maths and English, at grades A to C falls by over 70%. The proposer mentioned that correlation, and it clearly exists. There is a 70% probability that those children will not achieve those grades, which clearly links absenteeism with achievement. There is no question about it: the two are linked. I am interested in hearing what the Minister has to say about what new

methods his Department can bring forward to help. The one thing —

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Craig: Yes.

Mr Storey: On the issue of new methods, it is very strange that the Minister recently rejected the rolling out of the Achieving Belfast pilot. Yet, lo and behold, we discover that he has introduced a 'Draft Traveller Child in Education Action Framework' for consultation, and, surprise, surprise, one of the issues to be addressed is improving school attendance. I am not saying that it should not be addressed; I am saying that the Minister has established the principle, identified the problem and produced a policy — I see no such policy for working-class Protestant boys.

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

Mr Craig: I agree with the Chair of the Committee. If the Minister can find new methods of looking at one specific group, surely he can find a method of looking specifically at underachievement among Protestant boys attending schools in deprived areas.

The other thing that clearly emerged from our report was that, unfortunately, in some schools, the absentee rate is not 10% but 18%. All that feeds back into the deprivation that is found, and in many cases hidden, within those communities: single-parent families; health problems in families; and educational underachievement among parents. All lead to difficulties with children attending school. What we then find is that, unfortunately for those families and children, underachievement is repeated time and time again. If we can at least tackle the issue of absenteeism, get the kids into school and educate them well, we can, hopefully, break the cycle of underachievement in those areas.

A number of reports have now highlighted the fact that absenteeism is a major issue in loyalist/Protestant communities, and I appeal to the Minister to tackle that. Why are all the schemes still sitting in Belfast as pilot schemes? They have proved their worth, Minister, as underachievement in areas where they have been applied lessens every year. So let us forget the word "pilot" and start rolling them out across Northern Ireland. I appeal to the Minister that they be rolled out first in loyalist areas of deprivation. The need is there, as is the requirement that we try to tackle the

issue. If we can break the cycle of absenteeism, we can break the cycle of underachievement. I appeal to the Minister to apply some new methods.

Minister; I am the first to recognise that not all the responsibility lies with your Department. The Department for Social Development, OFMDFM and the Health Department all have a part to play in breaking the cycle. However, the first thing is to try to get kids back to school. Minister, I make this appeal: spread the other projects more widely. Let us stop tinkering about at the edges and make a real effort to tackle the issue.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As this is the first debate in which the Assembly will hear from Megan Fearon, I remind the House of the convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, but I feel that it has been directed at the wrong Department. Absenteeism in schools is quite clearly the direct responsibility of the Department of Education.

As Minister of Education, John O'Dowd has driven forward a range of policies that will have a very beneficial effect on the education system in the North and on all its children. Obviously, one of the primary initiatives taken was ending academic selection. It has been argued by experts that this policy will, undoubtedly, improve the prospects of all children, but particularly those from working-class Protestant communities. The proposers of the motion have rejected that policy time and time again, despite the inherent benefits that it will bring to those communities whose welfare they seem to be so concerned about now.

Sinn Féin fully supports the need for an integrated approach to tackling absenteeism. Attendance at school is linked to educational fulfilment, which, in the long run, improves employment opportunities and prospects for later life.

4.15 pm

There are a whole range of reasons why absenteeism is a growing concern. Unfortunately, the causes can be found embedded in the importance that families and communities place on education. There is an obvious link between school attendance and deprivation. Therefore, all Departments need to

make a concerted effort to tackle deprivation to ensure that no child is left behind.

I am aware that the Department of Education has been working with other Departments, such as the Department of Health, to roll out a number of programmes that target vulnerable groups for whom absenteeism is a problem. Those programmes have been running alongside the recently launched Valuing Education campaign. That campaign is aimed at parents and emphasises the importance of their role in ensuring that children and young people get the best education possible. There is a responsibility on every one of us to ensure that children and young people get the most from their education and that it is valued as one of the most important factors in their development.

There is no simple solution to any of this. On the whole, attendance rates across the North sit at around 95% for primary schools and 93% for post-primary schools. Although that shows that a lot of good work has been going on, there is still room for improvement. The effort to do that must involve government, parents, families, schools, community organisations and statutory bodies. We must be willing to adapt to changing times so that our education system is the best that it can be in ensuring that young people reach their full potential. I support the motion.

Mrs Overend: I commend my colleague Roy Beggs for securing the debate. He has worked hard to compile the statistics, and, in moving the motion, he outlined why it is so important that this problem has been identified. He is obviously passionate about the topic, and he deserves credit for the work that he has put in.

Absenteeism is a very real issue in our society, and it is clear from the statistics that it is of particular concern in some specific areas. As the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency shows, those areas are mainly Protestant. We are all well aware of the educational underachievement that is evident among working-class Protestant boys, not least through the research that Dawn Purvis and others conducted. Hopefully, this debate will complement and add to that research and, most importantly, aid the process of addressing those failings.

First, I want to look at absenteeism from a local perspective, as one of the worst wards is in my constituency of Mid Ulster. Of the worst 30 cases of poor post-primary attendance, one is in the Oldtown ward in Cookstown. It is evident that the situation in that area has been getting

progressively worse since 2007. I call on OFMDFM to look specifically at each of the worst 30 cases, to ask why mainly Protestant areas are affected and to bring forward targeted interventions that will improve outcomes.

I also have serious concerns about the school attendance statistics in various other wards in Mid Ulster. Those wards include Lissan, Pomeroy and The Loup in Cookstown, as well as Ballymaguigan and Bellaghy in Magherafelt. All those wards also show a steady decline in attendance. That shows that this is a concern not solely in predominantly Protestant areas but that it is an issue for everyone. However, I reiterate that the areas that are most affected across the board are predominantly Protestant.

These high rates of absenteeism cannot be allowed to continue. As my party's spokesperson for children and young people, I would, of course, highlight the importance of education for our young people. Inequality of educational attainment is widening, and basic standards of numeracy and literacy are still a major problem. Something as simple as increasing attendance rates in the most affected areas would have such a positive effect. Allied to that, with youth unemployment rising to over 22% and an increasingly competitive job market, it is more important than ever that our young people have the skills to gain employment.

I see this as an issue of promoting the value of education. Mr Hazzard and his Sinn Féin colleague referred to children feeling stupid and to the need to do away with the transfer test. This issue is about raising the lowest levels of achievement; it is not about reducing the standards of achievement of those at the top of our schools.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, if children do not attend school, it does not matter what school they are at? The key issue is ensuring that children, even at primary level, attend school. The problem starts at primary school in many areas, but it does not matter whether their school is a grammar school, a secondary school or a primary school.

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

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree that the problem starts at primary school. We need to value numeracy and literacy and ensure that teaching of both begins in primary school so that children have the confidence to go on to post-primary school

with the ability to learn and achieve and the desire to go to school. That begins at primary school.

The motion is clear, in that it calls on the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to ensure an integrated approach to identifying the causes of absenteeism, and I fully support that rationale. The underlying and associated issues for absenteeism and educational underachievement are varied and include crime, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as a lack of social and family ties. It is therefore only through Departments, such as the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Justice, working with agencies such as Sure Start that we will begin to see improvements. That obviously needs to be co-ordinated, and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which has responsibility for children and young people, is the most appropriate mechanism for doing so.

I would welcome an update from the Minister, when responding, on the work being undertaken to combat absenteeism, as well as a commitment to improve the cross-departmental and cross-agency working that is necessary for success. We cannot allow a situation in which there continues to be inequality in educational attainment. I hope that the debate will bring home to the Education Minister and his Executive colleagues the issue's huge importance and the need for immediate change.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion. Absenteeism is the responsibility of the Department of Education, but I accept and support the sentiment that there is a need for an integrated approach to the issue.

There are many and varied barriers to education. Research informs us that problems with absenteeism are often rooted in families and communities from low socio-economic backgrounds and that there is a clear link in communities between deprivation and education. I agree that we need an integrated approach that involves families, education practitioners, communities and statutory agencies. That is needed to make any real progress.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. I accept that we all use the phrase "disadvantaged areas". I was not born in a household that had a huge amount of money; I come from what would be termed a working-class Protestant area. I went to a secondary

school not a grammar school, but I do not concur with the earlier comments, because I never at any stage felt excluded, or whatever. I had a support system, which was family encouragement, even though the circumstances in my family were not in any way affluent. Surely it is about parents and families, not the area that a person comes from. I think that we can sometimes talk down areas and communities in a way that does us all a disservice.

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

Ms Boyle: Thank you. I concur with the Member's sentiments, but there is an issue around multiple deprivation and education, and if the Member allows me, I will continue and mention that later in my speech.

Absenteeism is often a sign of a much more serious problem, such as a family in crisis, in which a number of different problems are present; low self-esteem; lack of academic skills; addiction problems of one or more parent; or abuse or neglect. It is well-documented that those most likely to drop out of school will enter adulthood presenting other social issues and will engage in antisocial behaviour, petty crime and vandalism. An increase in crime means more victims and an added cost to the whole community.

A child's home environment is key to good school attendance. As soon as problems are identified in families, there should be robust systems in place that are workable and managed to support the family unit. In homes where problems persist with school attendance, children often become isolated, and parents do not know where to turn to for help. If there are no early interventions in place, the problems are left to manifest themselves, as is often the case. Early intervention is key.

Many parents have had some bad personal experience of the education system. So, it is important that those families are targeted, so that absenteeism trends within families can be identified and the proper support given.

The Education Welfare Service supports and advises schools on non-attendance and is empowered to take a parent to court for non-attendance. Parents are responsible for ensuring that their child attends school but if, for whatever reasons, parents do not comply with that, they may find themselves before the courts. Is that really the answer to the problem — pressure on families, causing more hardships, court costs and court backlogs?

Absenteeism affects many children from different walks of life. Although there is a focus on those from deprived backgrounds, studies have shown that that has expanded. I refer to the Drum Opinion, for anybody who has not read it yet. The Departments of Education and Health have established varied programmes to provide support to target specific groups known to be vulnerable and where school attendance is a problem. The Valuing Education campaign aims to raise awareness of a good education, and the Department of Education has recently commissioned research into improving school attendance in deprived areas in order to identify strategies that have proved successful in addressing non-attendance. I hope to hear from the Minister later on the recommendations emerging from that research.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem. There is continuing good work going on in the Department of Education, but more work can and should be done. We have to ask ourselves this: what have we done recently as political representatives? What efforts have we made in engaging with schools, teachers and communities to help address the problem? We need to work closely alongside them and our children, for they are the future, to help them to reach their potential in life, be it academic or vocational.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an deis labhairt ar an rún seo. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate.

The causes of pupil absenteeism are many and varied, as was outlined in the debate. They are often rooted in how families and communities perceive and value education. It is only through a partnership involving parents, schools, communities and statutory agencies that real changes can be made. I am determined to see progress.

Many statistics and figures were quoted in the Chamber. I wish to quote a number of them, just to put the debate in context. I am not suggesting that any of the figures I will portray means that the issue of absenteeism among the Protestant community is not important. However, we have to put the figures out there.

The overall attendance rate at primary schools is around 95%, and in post-primary schools it is 93%. As Members pointed out, those overall rates mask a deeper problem in particular areas and communities. There is a clear link between deprivation and school attendance. The data show that attendance rates tend to be lower in

schools with high levels of free school meals entitlement. For example, post-primary schools with fewer than 10% of pupils entitled to free school meals had an overall absence rate of 4.6%, with 11.7% for schools with more than 50% of pupils entitled to free school meals.

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

I want to put the overall statistics in the public domain. Overall absence levels in primary schools are slightly lower for Protestant pupils, at 4.6%, than for Catholic pupils, at 5.3%. The level is at 5.7% for pupils of other religions. Post-primary absence levels are very similar for Protestant and Catholic pupils at 7.2% and 7.3% respectively. I also want to put GCSE examination results on the record. Of those not achieving five good GCSEs, there are 3,916 Protestant school leavers — 42% of that population — and 4,529 Catholic school leavers, which is 38.8% of that population. The number of Protestant school leavers who achieve no GCSEs whatsoever is 200, which is 2.2%. For Catholic school leavers, it is 263, which is 2.3%. I put those figures on the public record because each one of them is a failing by our society. No one in any sector or community can be complacent about educational underattainment. I put that on the record for that reason only; I do not wish to say that one is worse off than the other. We have to get it right for all of them.

4.30 pm

Mar sin de, tá cuid mhór le déanamh le dul i ngleic leis an fhadhb seo. There is much to be done to address the problem. Every one of us, including parents, carers, teachers, public figures and the wider community, has a role to play in ensuring the best outcomes for our children and young people. The exchange between the Chair of the Education Committee and my colleague Michaela raises an issue around the perception that, if you come from a socially deprived area, you will fail in education. I am not suggesting for one second that Michaela was presenting that, but the point raised by the Chair is important: where you are born should not be your destiny. Of course, there are obstacles to achieving educationally. As has been shown in many fine examples across this city, Derry and throughout rural communities, there are schools in socially deprived areas that buck the trend. They ensure that the young people who leave them, regardless of their socio-economic background, have received an excellent education. That is achieved through strong leadership in the principal's office, the classroom, the family

home and the community. That is how that is achieved; there is no magic formula. Leadership is the key. We should send out the message that we, as an Assembly, have a responsibility to tackle social deprivation, but no one in a socially deprived area should allow that to be their destiny. There is a chance to change these things. Of course, we, as an Executive and Assembly, have a responsibility to intervene, but there are schools that show that, despite all the pressures bearing down on them, they will have high-attaining young people leaving their school.

The majority of our schools, thankfully, provide a high-quality education, set high standards, ensure equality of access and offer a wide range of opportunities for all children and young people to engage in learning. Schools should also provide a support system for those who are most vulnerable and should encourage a culture of regular attendance. When that is not happening, as has been pointed out, we must ask why and look at what we can do to support schools and their pupils.

Let me set out briefly actions that my Department and others are taking to improve school attendance. The Every School a Good School policy has already been referred to. It has found that pupils achieve more where their parents take an active interest in their education by supporting and encouraging them and setting high but achievable expectations and aspirations. Parental engagement is essential. An action of the Every School a Good School policy is to promote high aspirations and increased engagement between the schools and the communities that they serve. There is also a role for politicians and community leaders in raising high expectations. We, as community leaders, have a responsibility there. We must encourage our young people to do well in education. We must equip them to do well in education, and I am not sure that we always do that. That is one of the reasons why I have launched — you may have heard of this — an advertising campaign aimed at raising awareness of the value of good education and emphasising the importance of education to families and communities, particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. The campaign was launched on 17 September, and it will continue to be rolled out over the months ahead. It will focus on early interventions and will support critical transition phases on the education journey. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and older siblings all have a crucial role to play.

Parental engagement with the school, parental capacity to support the child's education and

instilling the value of education in the parent and the child are all critical elements in tackling poor attendance and non-attendance. If a young person is not attending school and their parents are not intervening, the parents do not understand the value of education.

Unfortunately, we do not all come from nuclear families or caring backgrounds. All parents do not carry out their duties as they should and as we would expect. There are young people who are vulnerable and require state intervention. I will return to that.

There is no magic solution or one-size-fits-all initiative that will solve the problem. Flexible and practical responses that are based on the particular needs and circumstances of the school and the school community are required to facilitate actions that will work.

In March 2012, my Department published research on improving attendance in schools that serve deprived areas and sought to identify strategies that have proved successful in promoting attendance and addressing non-attendance. Mr Beggs noted the report and criticised it for not dealing with the issue of Protestant absenteeism. If Mr Beggs or any other Member wishes to bring anything to my attention that they believe can deal with that specific issue, I am happy — I think the Member wishes to say something.

Mr Beggs: Some of your colleagues indicated that responsibility for this lies entirely with the Department of Education. In my mind, the purpose of the debate was to clearly indicate that a range of Departments and agencies have responsibilities. Through engagement with the local community, raising expectations and promoting the value of education, standards can be driven up and more and more people can be encouraged to attend school.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the debate; it has sparked a number of interesting media debates today. You were on the radio this morning, and I listened to a quite interesting debate on the radio this afternoon. Therefore, the debate is welcome, as it has sparked a debate about education outside the House.

My Department is involved in creating a positive school ethos and culture in the area of attendance. You would, perhaps, think that that would be a regular mantra of schools, yet today I heard a school principal say that he has only recently introduced that. Fair play to him for doing that. It is making positive changes in his school.

Among the recommendations in the report were the implementation of an attendance policy and targets; having designated staff with roles and responsibilities; having reward schemes for good attendance and additional support for poor attendees; building strong relationships between schools, parents and carers and links between schools and the wider community; and collaboration between schools and external support services, such as the Education Welfare Service and multiagency networks. The research indicated that programmes such as breakfast clubs, which are provided through my Department's extended schools programmes, have a positive impact on school attendance and behaviour.

The message is that schools should take a positive approach to attendance and make it a priority focus. They need to recognise their role and develop appropriate attendance policies even, as mentioned by Mr Rogers, at preschool, where patterns can develop that can continue into primary and post-primary schools. Many schools use innovative approaches, such as mentoring and age-appropriate reward systems, with the focus on making school a fun place to be. My officials are taking forward the findings of that research and are working with the Education Welfare Service and schools to develop best practice guidance based on the recommendations. However, for a child to do well at school, every parent or carer has a duty to provide their child with a full-time education by ensuring regular attendance. We must proactively enforce that.

The Education Welfare Service supports schools through proactive work and attendance strategies and advises on attendance policies. Schools refer pupils when there are concerns about attendance and when the threshold of less than 85% attendance has been reached. The service is empowered to take parents to court. I accept the comments from my colleague that court should be the last option. A parent ending up in court is a recognition of a failing in the system, but it is the last port of call.

The service works closely with schools and provides initiatives such as Primary Attendance Matters programmes and transition programmes to support the move from primary to post-primary level. This year, my Department spent £1.6 million to support the Education Welfare Service to address non-attendance in schools. Mr Swann referred to the difficulties in recruiting staff in this field, and it is on record that the education and library boards have difficulties recruiting professional staff. I think that part of that is the uncertainty about the future of the education and library

boards. I hope that the moving forward of the ESA legislation will give surety to professionals in the field that education is progressing on a steady footing, that there will be a managed transition from the education and library boards to ESA in the near future and that we will be able to fill a number of those posts.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes.

Mr Storey: Is it not more to do with the fact that, since 2006, the Department has had in place a vacancy control policy that has prohibited the boards from employing staff? The first thing that will have to be done when ESA is brought into being is that staff will have to be employed. Perhaps this is the place to put that on the record.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member is absolutely correct that it is a chicken-and-egg situation, but we have been attempting to establish ESA since 2006. I hope that that progresses and that the Assembly will make its own decisions on the issue. I also hope that the controlled vacancies will be removed under ESA. There have been a significant number of redundancies from the boards, and I believe that we can start to draw a line under those. We can move forward with a steady number of workers who will be able to deliver the services on the ground. That is a key reason why everyone wants to move forward.

As several Members mentioned, tackling the underlying causes of school absenteeism requires cross-sectoral approaches. I will give some examples of that. As I said, we work with the Education Welfare Service and other agencies and have established a number of work programmes to provide targeted support for specific groups that are known to be vulnerable and for which school attendance may be a problem. One example is school-age mothers. That is a major issue in relation to absenteeism, and we have put programmes in place. In addition, my Department is in collaboration with the DHSSPS, the Education Welfare Service and other agencies to develop a standardised, regional, personal education plan to provide targeted support to address attendance and educational attainment for looked-after children. Statistical data and evidence from the Education and Training Inspectorate indicates that school attendance and attainment for looked-after children, particularly those in residential care, can be poorer than that of the general school population.

There is no quick-fix solution, but we have seen an improvement in school attendance. The Chair of the Education Committee suggests that perhaps that is not so, but there has been a 7% decrease in absenteeism since 2009-2010. However, we still have 3,881 pupils who have been referred to the Education Welfare Service. That is not good enough. A lot of work has been done, and a lot more work needs to be completed to move the issue forward. As I said, if Members have alternative approaches for any community or the collective community, I am happy to listen to them.

Mr Kinahan: I thank everyone for taking part in the debate today but particularly my colleague. I commend him on his persistence in this matter, because it is phenomenally important. The education of our children is of incredible importance. We must ensure that truancy affects as few children as possible — in fact, no children — in the future.

I will start with a shocking case that many Members have heard about. It may not be applicable everywhere, but it shows how vital it is that we tackle truancy. In Room 115, we were given a presentation based on the Easterhouse area of Glasgow that started on a nice, peaceful, quiet evening before a 15-year-old ran through the streets and stabbed a passer-by who later died. He also stabbed another person and ended up in jail. Both his parents were alcoholics with drug problems. When he came out of jail, he met a girl, and they had a baby. We have to ensure that that cycle does not start again. That is the very worst case of truancy, and I raise it to hammer home the fact that we need to act, and we need to act now.

Today, we are calling on OFMDFM. I am grateful to the Education Minister for being present, and I hope that he will take Members' points to the Minister responsible and to other Ministers, but OFMDFM is responsible for co-ordinating the work of the Executive on children and young people's issues. Let us try to put in place a joint departmental project, led by one Department and co-ordinated by all, which can reduce absenteeism to a set of targets. We know that OFMDFM should be the lead Department, but it could be any Department. A great deal falls on the Department of Education as it is clearly responsible for the schooling of our children. We know that a lot of responsibility falls on the health service. We have all its data to hand: the records and details of illnesses directly applicable to truancy. We have data from the Department of Justice, the police and the probation service. We have data from the Department for Social

Development, the welfare service and housing and all the community groups that they help. We have the Minister of the Environment and his Department and the councils, which do fantastic work through communities. Then, of course, we have the community and voluntary workers themselves.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that the PSNI also has a role to play? There are many occasions when we see young people in our constituencies who, we assume, should be at school but are on our streets. There is uncertainty about what power the PSNI has to deal with that issue.

4.45 pm

Mr Kinahan: I am glad that the Member mentioned the PSNI; it is on my list of important areas.

We need to find a way to co-ordinate all that data so that we can act immediately. That will raise problems with the Data Protection Act 1998, and we need to find our way through that as well.

We have heard about numerous strategies and ideas today. I am concerned that it is the same old problem that we have in the Chamber — always strategy, strategy, strategy but very little action. Yet, some of the strategies and policies are fantastic, such as Sure Start, the nurture programme that we saw last week, Book Buddies or extended school programmes. We could go on and on, but we have to turn those strategies into actions and set them against targets and timescales. I, like others, would like to congratulate all the teachers who really try their hardest to put all those strategies in place and implement them. More and more responsibility is being thrown at them with fewer and fewer resources.

Yesterday, in the GCSEs debate, we highlighted the need to tackle innumeracy and illiteracy. I say again that helping children one-on-one is the way to tackle innumeracy and illiteracy, but we must have targets. We need to set a target of achieving zero illiteracy, say, in five years, and everything should flow from that. Truancy and absenteeism are inextricably linked to all that we know about innumeracy and illiteracy.

I congratulate the Department's researchers on providing a document from RSM McClure Watters that shows us many ways to tackle the problem. We are told that some 20,000 young people a year are away from school for more

than 15 days a year. We know that the problem is worse in post-primary schools than in primary schools and that it is worse where free schools meals take-up is highest. We know that it is worse in Protestant areas, although the Minister has shown us, through his statistics, that the problem is as bad in nationalist areas. It cannot be a coincidence that unemployment in those same areas is also as bad. We must not accept this any longer.

Reading this excellent report, I was shocked to discover that the survey went to only 141 primary schools and 36 post-primary schools. It should have gone to them all. I was shocked that we did not even have the names and addresses of school governors, nor did we have a way of asking them any questions. I think that we got 10 or 16 replies. We did not have the details on how to talk to focus groups; we managed to get to only four of them, whether they were made up of parents, staff or children. From all that, we learn that the Department does not know how to contact teachers, pupils and parents. We must resolve that problem, whether for area planning, ESA or assessment. There is so much going on, and it is very evident that we do not know how to communicate with those who may well know best.

The Minister touched on some of the excellent ideas that we should put in place. You need a whole-school approach, good leadership and a designated person in every school to be in charge of attendance. You need to make attendance a priority that is valued highly by everyone in the school. You need to make sure that senior management teams and boards of governors discuss attendance. You also need to make sure that all staff take a consistent approach. You need to make sure that everybody understands the policy and that it is well communicated and fed out into the community so that you really change the whole attitude. The report was quite excellent in that area, and I congratulate the Department on getting it pulled together.

What are we missing all the way through this? We are missing the resources and the funding. There are many splendid ideas out there. We need to put just that little bit more resource into those ideas to make sure that we tackle the problem. If we add those to the targets and achievements, we can really make truancy and absenteeism a thing of the past.

There are areas in my constituency where attendance was worse than 85%. In Springfarm, absenteeism moved from 11% to 20% and stayed at 20%. In Ballycraigh, the

rate went up from 20% to 25% and then down to 14%. In Carnmoney, it went down from 23% to 17% to 13%. I read out those figures because they all tell different stories about schools' achievements and about how they deal with things. That is how we should learn. We should pull from good practice and even from bad practice to make sure that this does not go on. I, too, congratulate Hedley Webb from Carrickfergus on setting a really thorough example for us all on how to pull the system together and make it work. The Ulster Unionist Party and everyone here call on the Minister of Education and other Ministers to pull together a plan to make sure that we can use the data, set targets and tackle the problem into the future.

My colleague Roy Beggs called for an integrated approach, and he highlighted Carrickfergus College. Mervyn Storey said, "Here we go again". We never want to hear that again. We want the issue to be dealt with from today. Chris Hazzard spoke about many strategies.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr Kinahan: From what I and others said, I think that we have all learned that there may be too many strategies. It was a good debate. We need to have an integrated approach, and we must resolve this problem. Let us have targets and strategies now.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is responsible for co-ordinating the work of the Executive and for children and young people's issues; notes the high levels of pupil absenteeism in primary and post-primary schools in many communities, and in particular, the high levels in areas identified by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency as being predominantly Protestant; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that an integrated approach to identifying the causes of absenteeism is adopted by all relevant Departments and appropriate action is taken, in conjunction with parents or guardians, to enable more young people to reach their full potential.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Health and Social Care: East Antrim

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Beggs: I am pleased to have secured this Adjournment debate on health and social care in East Antrim. The reason that I wanted to secure it can be summed up in one word: equality. Are my East Antrim constituents getting equal treatment when it comes to accessing health and social care provision? I am concerned that many are not.

I will set out the context for the debate. The last time that we debated an East Antrim-specific health topic in the Assembly was February 2008. At that time, the context was a consultation document that the Northern Health and Social Services Board had issued on replacing services in Inver House in Larne. This time, the context is more the 'Transforming Your Care' report, also known as the Compton report, which was published last December. I will speak on some of its implications later. I will also ask the Minister to clarify the status of this draft population report, its implementation plans and the consultation on those plans.

There seems to have been a plethora of reports and strategy documents on health and social care in recent years. Many have been accompanied by extensive public consultation exercises. However, a recurring theme for my East Antrim constituents is diminishing services and reducing facilities. That is a very strong perception. A number of decades ago, we had the closure of the Moyle and Carrickfergus hospitals in East Antrim. That was done to accommodate the upgrading of Antrim Area Hospital. More recently, Whiteabbey Hospital, which serves the southern tip of my constituency, lost its acute services. It now provides a minor injuries unit.

The designated acute hospital for the people of east Antrim is Antrim Area Hospital. I need hardly remind Members of the problems and difficulties at Antrim Area Hospital over recent years, particularly in the accident and

emergency department. However, I recognise that there is major construction going on to improve the facility, and I look forward to its early opening in order to provide a better service to my constituents. Another issue with Antrim Area Hospital is the transportation links. It is relatively difficult to access using public transport from Larne and Carrickfergus, never mind from areas such as Carnlough or Islandmagee.

Down the years, there have been promises of new local facilities and replacement services in east Antrim made by trusts, boards and Ministers, but very little has ever materialised. For example, the Carrickfergus Day Centre closed in the past 10 years, and there was an expectation that a new facility would be built within a short time. That did not happen.

I now wish to move on to the issue of health and care centres. In January 2006, the then Northern Board published, 'All Our Futures', which set out proposals for a major reform of health and social care services over the next 10 to 15 years, including investment in new services and facilities totalling £600 million. In Ballymena and Larne, changes were to include the opening of integrated health and care centres in 2010. They were to support an enhanced range of local community services. Obviously, that timescale has been missed, but the funding for Ballymena has been announced and plans seem to be progressing. However, what has happened to the new health and care centres for Larne and Carrickfergus?

Local health and care centres have the potential to provide many more services locally; be GP-led; be much more responsive and convenient; provide better access for patients; be more efficient; have many more services located in the community; and be easily accessible to those who need them. The services that are, I understand, being talked about include a specific diabetes unit and treatment for those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma. Those conditions need not be treated in a hospital, and, if they can be treated in the local community, it is much easier for all concerned. That takes the pressure off the hospital and helps to shorten the growing waiting lists for many hospital services.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member mentioned three diseases. Does he agree that the highest rates of those diseases in Northern Ireland are in east Antrim?

Mr Beggs: I agree that they are very serious conditions. Facilities need to be improved in

the local area to provide a better service for our people.

Another important area is care for the elderly, which is in the Compton report, 'Transforming Your Care'. I want to concentrate on that for a period. Part of the issue in the report concerns community and nursing and residential care homes. Again, anyone who, like me, has been a public representative since 1998 will be familiar with the reports produced by the health boards, the trusts, the Department and its consultants. The language in them is sometimes too full of jargon to be understood easily by the layperson, but the direction of travel is clear and consistent. The people who run the health service in Northern Ireland want to keep older people out of institutional care settings, maintain them in their own home for as long as possible and then have the private sector cater for those who need to go into care or a nursing home. Fine, but is there capacity for domiciliary and community care? Can even the current demands of care in the community be met? It was not that long ago that I was approached by a constituent who had a disabled son who could not return home from hospital for many weeks because there were no carers available to meet his needs.

Clearly, that aspect of the service needs to be upgraded. When it bedded down, it was much preferable, and the individual concerned and his family were much more content that he continued to live and be served in his home.

5.00 pm

In 2008-09 in East Antrim, along with many other constituencies, there was enormous public reaction to the proposals which, in the Northern Trust area, were called 'Reprovision of the Trust's Residential Homes for Older People'. The consultation document proposed that the trust's residential homes in East Antrim — Lisgarel in Larne, Greenisland House and Clonmore — were to close. That generated a level of public opposition that was unprecedented in my time as a public representative.

I am sad to say that, although, during my time as an East Antrim MLA, we had worked together on cross-party lines, it appeared to me that party politics crept in on this issue at that time. One MLA issued press releases while the consultation process was still live and resting with the trust. That MLA labelled the process the "McGimpsey cuts". The current Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was also enormously critical of his predecessor, the

Member for South Belfast. On 23 February 2009, Mr Poots led a debate in the Assembly, proposing the motion:

"That the Assembly expresses its opposition to the proposed closure of residential care homes by a number of Health and Social Care Trusts; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to intervene and listen to the concerns of the community and take appropriate action to minimise the pain, stress and anxiety that this uncertainty has created among elderly care home residents, their families and health workers."

His speech was full of emotive and pejorative language. He said:

"Does the Member agree that, when a trust asks an elderly person whether he or she would prefer to live in his or her own home or in a residential care home, the question is loaded? It will almost always elicit a response in favour of living in one's own home. For many people, who are not ready for a nursing home but who cannot stay at home, residential care is the only real and practical choice. If we go down the route of doing away with statutory residential care, we could end up with a situation similar to that in England, where care in residential private nursing homes is of a much lower standard than we would expect for our elderly people." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 38, p134, col 1].

I have one simple question for the Minister. Does he stand by what he said in the House at that time, or was he merely playing politics with this most sensitive issue? Is he now presiding over a policy that he apparently emphatically opposed just three years ago? If that is the case, he needs to explain to the House why that has happened.

Ultimately, Minister McGimpsey did listen to people in East Antrim at that time. Lisgarel and Clonmore were saved from closure. Greenisland House, with its multiple levels and difficulty of mobility about it, was to be replaced with new accommodation. It is three years since the closure of Greenisland House was announced, and I learned through the press that no more patients were being accepted into other local residential homes as permanent places were being reserved for residents of Greenisland House. However, after three years, no information was available in the public domain about how funding had been earmarked for that replacement. There was no information about which housing association would be

developing it or, indeed, of any having been appointed or on any planning permission. The community was very concerned that, once more, local health facilities were being closed and that nothing was being put in their place. When I highlighted the issue, I was pleased to receive, eventually, confirmation that capital funding has been earmarked. However, when I contacted the Housing Executive at the start of this month, some three weeks ago, I was told that, at that time, no housing association had been appointed. Perhaps the Minister might be able to tell us whether there has been any development on that issue since then.

I also wish to relay my personal experience of two of my extended family members who required support from the health service over the summer months. These were two elderly patients who required hospital treatment, and they were very rapidly returned to their own homes to receive domiciliary care.

In those instances, I had a feeling that it was much too fast, and there was concern in the family at the speed at which both of them had been returned home. Sadly, within a short period, both had to be returned to hospital, to the accident and emergency unit. Interestingly, after they had recovered in hospital, they were discharged to Clonmore House residential care home, where they received at least a full week of rehabilitation and support each. I visited that home at that time, and I have to be complimentary of the staff and the home. When both patients returned home to their normal setting, they were able to adapt and adjust with the support package that was available and with family support. However, I express concern that they were perhaps discharged from hospital too rapidly and without sufficient rehabilitation.

'Transforming Your Care', which is known as the Compton report, was published in December 2011 and contains some 99 recommendations. A draft population plan has been published on the Northern Health and Social Care Trust website, but the Minister has indicated that there is a certain level of doubt over the status of that report. I understand that it was to be considered over the summer period and that adjustments may be made before the end of December before going into consultation.

One recommendation in that report was for all statutory residential care homes, of which there are 11 at present with 220 permanent residents, to close. It would be helpful to have clarity on the position of that report and the position of the care homes in my constituency and the others

that will be affected. There is concern in the community, and I am sure that the Minister is aware of it. It is unfortunate that a draft plan has been put out and left hanging for so long, yet there is uncertainty about its status and whether or not that is exactly what is planned.

It is also unfortunate that, while MLAs in East Antrim used to meet together to get updates on health, it now appears that DUP MLAs meet separately with the health trusts, and others then meet separately as a group and are content to do so. I would much prefer for us all to meet together and work together for the benefit of all our people.

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

Mr Beggs: Health is too important an issue to play politics with, and I ask you to ensure that the needs of East Antrim are catered for.

Mr Hilditch: I warmly welcome the Adjournment topic and the opportunity to contribute to this pretty wide-ranging topic. I thank the Minister for his attendance and his ongoing interest in matters pertaining to our constituency, and I personally share and support much of the Minister's vision in transforming care, and I hope that our constituency can play an integral part in moving forward.

Historically, of course, East Antrim was stripped of much of its health and social care facilities under the former direct rule Government and, later, Administrations locally. People from the rural glens in the north, through the towns of Larne and Carrickfergus to the sprawling housing estates in the south of the constituency, have all been adversely affected and have had to travel to receive care in the major hospitals in Belfast city and, indeed, Antrim Area Hospital. At one stage, the constituency boasted three hospitals before the demise of Davidson Cottage Hospital, Moyle Hospital and Whiteabbey Hospital. However, people eventually travelled willingly, knowing that they were receiving the best standards and quality. They were happy to do so, and that commitment from constituents should be acknowledged.

As the Transforming Your Care strategy comes on line, it provides us with fresh challenges locally. We are all aware of the ageing and poorly conditioned health centres in Larne and Carrickfergus that are no longer fit for purpose. Indeed, I thank the Minister for taking time in June this year to witness at first hand the

problems encountered at Carrickfergus, when he visited to meet a group of local stakeholders that included two GP practices that operate from a very outdated and run-down facility.

I was previously involved with a proposal to create a health village and well-being centre in the Carrickfergus area. Unfortunately, that was a great opportunity lost. The project would have been unique to Northern Ireland, as it would have encompassed not only health and care, but blue-light facilities, sports facilities and general recreational opportunities. I believe that the Department and the civil servants under that previous mandate were wrong in their assertions that it could not go ahead.

I believe passionately that this location is very well placed to be the hub of one of the proposed integrated care partnerships (ICPs), incorporating the previously sought-after level 2 care centre.

As I previously stated, all the stakeholders are on board, from those on the front line of healthcare delivery to administrators, other relevant agencies and landowners. Such a facility would provide and deliver the extensive services that are desired, including GP services, a community chemist and in-reaching services from secondary providers such as hospitals and other auxiliaries.

I stress very strongly that there will be a high level of co-operation between local government, the Department, the trust and other relevant agencies in working through the logistics of any temporary service provision if an ICP were afforded to the area.

I must say that the Transforming Your Care strategy has, in this case, prompted the local GPs to fully involve themselves in the vision, and I had the opportunity to attend several meetings where I witnessed a progressive and ambitious attitude and the building of collaborative working relationships with other stakeholders as we strive for a modern facility for the area.

It is also worth acknowledging the work of a health inequalities officer Mr Iain McAfee on the document that he has provided, which contains statistics for the Carrickfergus area in relation to Transforming Your Care. There are certainly some interesting figures in the document, including the above-average incidence in the area of deaths due to respiratory disease and the alarming female life-expectancy figures, which are not only below average for Northern Ireland but fall into the 20% lowest female life

expectancy in the UK. It was quite shocking to discover that.

There are many other areas of health and care to cover, not least, vital nursing home services such as those at Lisgarel, Joymount House and Greenisland House in the constituency. Hopefully, those will also feature in any forthcoming discussions on the Transforming Your Care strategy. However, it is my hope that the excellent preparatory work in relation to establishing an integrated care partnership in the area comes to fruition.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We are now entering into a review of health and social care in Northern Ireland, under the heading of Transforming Your Care. Contained in this programme is the biggest shake-up of health and social care that I and many of us will probably ever know about.

The report states that the number of acute hospitals here is 10 and that number will fall to five or seven. A greater number of elderly people are to be cared for at home, but the present Government have started a process of cutting benefits. The trust has still not stated where the funding will come from, and that is one of the big problems, which is only now starting to get through to the public.

We met with the trust, and one of the things discussed was that people are entitled to keep their relatives at home. That is fine, and no one argues with it. However, at present, it costs approximately £500 per week to keep an elderly person in care. Is that same package, or part of it, going to be there when the relative is kept at home? That has not yet been sorted out. By the time we sort that out, and sort out the individual cases, we will be away behind — unless we are already doing it.

We are told that too many people are being referred to hospital A&E departments by GPs and doctors on call and that is blocking up the A&E departments. That will have to change, and no one will argue with that.

At present, in the Northern Trust, there are 11 residential homes, and it is proposed that all of them should close and we should go down the road of independent living. That is fine for some. However, families are now asking where patients will go, for example, in cases of dementia? I have been surprised by the number of people who have inundated my constituency office, asking this one question: what will happen to their loved one at home,

when the residential homes, as we know them today, are closed?

Hospital appointments are difficult for people who live where I come from in the glens of Antrim — places such as Carnlough and Glenarm. How will the new proposal help them? Number one: public transport is not geared towards taking people to hospital. Number two: every hospital appointment is for 9.00 am or 10.00 am, when it is virtually impossible to get public transport to Antrim Area Hospital from practically anywhere on the East Antrim coast. If you have to go to Belfast, it is even worse. That problem has not been sorted yet. There have been no discussions between the public transport sector and the health bodies. At this stage, no discussion has taken place to see what is possible.

Ambulance response times in the glens are still outside the target time, and that situation has not changed for years. In fact, when we raised the issue before, the previous Minister actually cut the number of A&E ambulances in East Antrim and replaced them with rapid response vehicles. They are not the answer, but they tick a box as far as the response is concerned.

5.15 pm

The document does not tackle the major problem of differences in urban and rural provision. One of the main issues is community transport. Just this year, the funding for taking people in rural areas to hospital appointments was cut. That same privilege is still afforded to the urban dweller, who can get community transport to go to hospital appointments. However, no one in the rural areas gets that service. That imbalance has still not been squared up.

The majority of the public still do not know about the changes. Doctors and councils have all been very quiet. I draw my next point to the Minister's attention and thank him for attending this evening's debate. About a month ago, the Patient and Client Council embarked on a number of roadshows to explain all about Transforming Your Care. There were nine roadshows in total, and not one of them was in East Antrim. When I phoned to ask why that was, the answer I got was that next year East Antrim should be top of the pile. Next year? Next year, it will be too late. If it was a matter of funding, the council should have held one roadshow for the whole of Northern Ireland instead of picking out nine areas. Maybe there was a reason for that, and, Minister, maybe you can tell me what it is.

Recently, the local commissioning groups met, and the councils covered by the Northern Local Commissioning Group have met, but nobody knows what they are talking about. Ten councils are meeting to talk about Transforming Your Care, but nobody knows what they are saying. The only people in that whole package who have not been mentioned in the discussions or consultation are the MLAs. How are councils going to get the word out to people about the importance of Transforming Your Care and everything that it entails? We still do not know. However, from what I am told, it seems that the councils that will be reporting on it will be relying on their councillors. So, councillors have to go out and find out what is wrong. In a lot of cases, councillors have not had it explained to them exactly what is wrong. The trusts have made presentations to local authorities, but a 15- or 20-minute presentation does not explain the whole situation.

I thank the Member for East Antrim for securing this Adjournment debate today. East Antrim suffers from some of the highest rates of serious illnesses, one of which is cancer. The figures are rising, as are the figures for asthma, obesity and respiratory diseases. The figures are massively high. How are we going to sort this out in East Antrim when the loved ones of people who are supposedly coming home to stay do not know how they are going to care for them? Minister, if we can sort that problem out, we will go a long way towards sorting out a lot of the other health problems.

When you ask doctors about this issue, you find that they do not know anything. Doctors have representation on some of the subgroups that have been set up. Surely the doctors should be getting more information across to the patients. Everybody involved has been very quiet.

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

Mr McMullan: Minister, the Northern Local Commissioning Group serves the whole Northern Trust area, yet only four elected representatives sit on it when there should be at least double that number.

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

Mr Ross: In the five years that I have been in the House, health matters and health inequalities in East Antrim have always been high on the agenda. Indeed, as Mr Beggs said, although it has been several years since we had a specific debate about healthcare in East Antrim, we are regularly contacted about it

locally. During that time, a number of changes and challenges have occurred in the area. In 2009, the inpatient surgery moved to the Antrim Area Hospital and the Causeway Hospital. In 2011, the A&E unit at Whiteabbey Hospital was reconfigured and is now a minor injuries unit. At that time, it is fair to say that there was a concern that, perhaps, it should not have been reconfigured until the upgrade at Antrim Area Hospital was complete. Antrim Area Hospital was not built to cater for the numbers of people currently going through it. Therefore, some of the concerns that people had were valid. It was not ready for the increased footfall, and I am quite sure that Members representing all parties in East Antrim could refer to a number of pretty bad experiences in Antrim Area Hospital.

Mr McMullan talked about public transport. I, too, have spoken to constituents who do not drive and really struggle to get to morning appointments at Antrim Area Hospital. I have spoken to people who want to visit loved ones in the hospital and really struggle to get there. Those who do get there perhaps struggle to do so during visiting times and spend hours in the canteen waiting until the next scheduled visiting time before returning home. It is not perfect.

There are other cases in which people have had to wait for many hours to be seen in A&E. Others have had to wait for several weeks to receive surgery; even urgent surgery. That adds to people's concern and frustration in East Antrim. As Mr McMullan said, that is particularly the case given that the population of East Antrim is made up of more elderly people than is the case in other areas of Northern Ireland. He mentioned the higher rates of coronary heart disease, asthma, diabetes, kidney disease and other conditions. Of course, there is the challenge of it being a large rural area. At the last trust meeting that Mr McMullan and I attended together, he specifically mentioned that issue and the difficulties that it presents.

I hope that, this time next year, when the upgrade of the Antrim Area Hospital has been completed, there will be more positive experiences for people who have to go there. However, there is also a responsibility on representatives to ensure that people who do not need to go to A&E do not go. It uses up resources, takes up time and results in longer waiting times for people who genuinely need to go. If people do attend A&E for a case that is not an emergency, they will have to wait much longer because genuine cases will be top of the list. It is important to get that message out.

The local delivery of health provision was referred to. Mr Hilditch talked about how the health centres in Larne and Carrickfergus are in urgent need of replacement or substantial upgrading. Replacement would be much better because nobody could argue that the current situation is up to scratch. The building in which Carrickfergus health centre is based is just not suitable for delivering some of the modern healthcare services that we want to be delivered in the local community.

As Mr Beggs and others said, it is preferable for people not to have to go to hospital for procedures that could be done in their community. I think that everybody has bought into that concept. As Mr Hilditch also said, the local council has been quite helpful in trying to facilitate improvements in Carrickfergus and in identifying sites that could be available. Again, in Larne, we do not think that the replacement building is high enough up the priority list, and that is disappointing.

As Mr Beggs and others said, in the past, there have been a number of public petitions and a lot of correspondence with us on debates and issues, including Inver House, Lisgarel and Greenisland House, all of which were mentioned. There is real concern about healthcare and ambulance provision throughout East Antrim. However, as has been said, today's debate is occurring in a context of change. With the Compton review, there will be changes to how healthcare services are delivered, not only in East Antrim but across Northern Ireland. The Minister's challenge is not necessarily just to get people's support but to gain their confidence. Elderly people want to stay in their home, and we know that those who stay at home to receive care have better outcomes than those forced into hospital.

The challenge is to make sure that the confidence is there, that people believe that the support networks exist and that they will get the care that they need. I know that some of the initiatives that the Minister has been very positive on, such as the connected health issue and remote monitoring of patients, will help with that and will help people to stay in their homes for much longer. I think that we are going to move towards that.

Facilities such as Inver House, where rehabilitation has taken place, are very close to the hearts of people in East Antrim. Most people you talk to will have had a relative or friend who has been through Inver House and who received great care there. Some of the concerns about changes in independent living or rehabilitation services are in that area. That

needs to be borne in mind when any changes to the provision in East Antrim are being considered.

In conclusion, people understand and support that changes to create a better health service are required. They will accept fewer sites with specialised services as long as those deliver a higher level of service and provide better care for patients. Likewise, people will support the move to deliver more services locally rather than in hospital, as long as those services are delivered in modern facilities that are capable of providing them. I think that there will be support for any changes that are happening as long as those two issues are dealt with and there is confidence in the community. However, I do not think that that level of confidence is there yet in East Antrim, and there is a body of work to be done by all of us to explain the rationale for changes that are happening and to build confidence among the population.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I apologise for being a few moments late. I was meeting some people who have an interest in healthcare in East Antrim. I also thank Mr Beggs for bringing the debate to the Floor and the Health Minister for being present.

East Antrim residents have many concerns about the health and social care provision in our area. However, it is safe to say that two issues are prominent in most people's minds. Those are the diminishing range and quality of services over the years, and the large shift in focus from residential care to care in the community. Regrettably, that model has inspired little community confidence and is widely viewed as dysfunctional. Although both those developments have taken place in the context of changes in medical and social care practice, the influence of budget constraints is undeniable. Where the first point is concerned, we must consider how to reverse that trend and best provide for the expansion and improvement of health and social care services in East Antrim.

As other Members said, in recent years we have seen either the closure or downgrading of services and other facilities in the Larne and Whiteabbey hospitals. Some of that happened for honest and reasonable medical purposes, while other reasons are highly disputed in the community. Nevertheless, they have placed additional burdens on hospitals in Belfast and Antrim, and residents from East Antrim have further to travel for their care.

I believe that there is enormous potential, as others said, for better services to be delivered

through local health hubs, where there is extensive collaboration and integration of service provision. Such services could include GPs, community chemists and in-reaching services from hospitals. For example, there is scope for more diagnostic services locally and for care for those with diabetes, blood pressure, heart problems and other conditions. That could cut waiting times and the administration that is associated with referrals to hospitals in Antrim and Belfast.

Although it makes sense for those hubs to be located in the larger urban areas, we must not neglect those hard-to-reach areas, such as the glens in the northern part of the constituency and other places that are not close to those urban centres. That highlights what I said in previous debates about the importance of the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety working together to ensure that all parts of our constituencies are properly connected to those services.

Of course, such services cannot be provided without the appropriate capital investment. As has been said, the Minister has already visited GP practices in the area and knows the challenges that they face with the age, size and condition of those facilities. The current facilities in Carrickfergus and Larne, for example, would not be able to meet the standards that are expected for the type of health hub that we, hopefully, envisage for the future of healthcare in East Antrim. However, with the appropriate investment, there is a huge opportunity to create exemplars of locally provided healthcare.

We all understand the budgetary constraints on the Department, but that must be weighed against the savings that could be achieved by utilising health hubs to provide services locally.

5.30 pm

I turn now to this evening's second issue. We must consider how to provide the best and most appropriate care for older people in the context of an ageing population and ever-increasing complex needs. There is little disagreement that a person should be in a nursing or residential home only if that provides the most effective and appropriate service for that person.

Great emphasis is, rightly, put on rehabilitation. However, not all patients can be rehabilitated, and, regardless of the relentless drive towards that aim, which, in the view of many, is ill

conceived, there will continue to be a need for residential and other imaginative care arrangements. Regrettably, the response from the Department and the trust has been to run down residential care and to replace it with systems by which carers arrive in the patient's home at all times of the day and night. The public has serious doubts about the ability to deliver services effectively by that mechanism, as care packages and money are already out of step with each other, and resources are, regrettably, meagrely provided.

The current residential care model is criticised for having little imagination with regard to care needs, beyond stimulation or rehabilitation, but I have heard stories of residents and their families who know and value the services provided in residential homes to those who simply cannot live on their own.

We need pragmatism and flexibility to implement models that are tailored to the needs of the person. Some will require the setting of a residential home, and some will require sheltered accommodation. I am sure that the Minister is well aware that there is an excellent example at Barn Halt in Carrickfergus. It has on-duty staff, activities and facilities and easy access to shops and services. Some people will require care in their home. We cannot be asked to implement a blanket policy that tries to fit everyone into the same box.

Today, I would like to acknowledge, and have the Minister acknowledge, that some people require residential care, and assurances that the Department, along with the trust, will pause for thought and consider the massive variation in care requirements and commit to flexibility in respect of the options of care that can be provided.

Mr McDevitt: I rise as party health spokesperson, as the party is regrettably unable to offer direct representation in the House to the people of East Antrim. However, I assure colleagues that we will seek to rectify that at the earliest possible opportunity and, of course, continue to represent the constituency to the best of our abilities from outside and indirectly through people such as myself.

Looking from the outside at the provision of health and social care in a constituency such as East Antrim, you are struck by the significant and, in fact, fundamental challenge faced by the Minister and anyone looking to reform or improve health services in the region. The constituency stretches from the outskirts of Belfast through the glens of Antrim and practically to the north coast. It is a

constituency that represents nearly every population type and settlement type in this region. I hope that when Transforming Your Care comes to be substantiated and we get to see the specific detail as against the ambition for reform, it can meet the needs of every person living in the East Antrim constituency.

I note that several colleagues have remarked on the importance of connected health in a rural constituency such as East Antrim; I suppose that that would be a significant opportunity for people in the glens in particular. However, you cannot get good connected health without a decent broadband service. That is how it is connected. Only last week, my good friend Andrew McAlister spoke for everyone in the constituency when he pointed out that there is no such thing as a broadband service worth talking about in very large parts of the East Antrim constituency and, certainly, in large parts of the glens. I defer to Mr McMullan's local knowledge in that regard.

Therefore, when we talk about improving healthcare and facing up to the need to reform healthcare in a constituency such as East Antrim, we are really talking about improving infrastructure and communications. We are talking about improving an awful lot more than just that for which the Health Minister has responsibility. We need to be very careful not to make commitments that we simply will not be able to meet, particularly commitments to communities that, if we are honest about it and look back through recent history, have been let down time and time again, and, more often than not, feel not just physically isolated but isolated from the decision-making process and, in fact, occasionally left out.

I think that we are all agreed that there is no question that we need to change the way in which acute secondary care is provided for at a regional level. We will all be grown up and mature about the need to do so. However, I am very taken by the stories that colleagues have offered, perhaps best illustrated by Mr Ross, who talked about the need for families to hang around hospital canteens for hours on end because it is too far a round trip to make to go home between hospital visiting slots. That is the real human impact of centralising acute services. That is where families do not see the benefit of centres of excellence, even though their family member in the care of that centre may benefit from being there. That is where families are directly impacted.

We talk about a "shift left" and the idea that we will bring care closer to individuals and provide them with more care in the home. Indeed, that

is a very noble and good thing to aspire to. However, I fear, and I agree with the Member who moved the motion in this regard, that that may lead to the unintended or increased privatisation of very large parts of our care infrastructure, something that I do not think has ever been proven to have been in the patient's interest and introduces a separate motive that is not about care — a profit motive — into the provision of health and social care services.

Those of us living in and representing the city can probably cope with change a little better, because the distances are never too great and the inconveniences not so massive. However, I hope that, as we seek to improve and change the way in which we provide healthcare in the region, we meet the test of being able to deliver the highest possible standard for people who are most isolated. Some of the people who live in east Antrim, as I know the constituency, are among those living in the most isolated parts of the region. I hope that, in six or seven years' time, they will be able to feel that the NHS in this part of Ireland still works for them.

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in the debate. I thank colleagues for giving me the opportunity to participate.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful for the opportunity to hear the views of Members on the issue. As Health Minister, my vision is to ensure that the services provided by health and social care providers meet the needs of patients, clients and local communities. My aim is to continue to support the development of high-quality, integrated and responsive primary and community care services that will benefit all who live in Northern Ireland. It is the people who work in health and social care services — the doctors, the nurses, the therapists, the administrators, the auxiliary staff and the managers — who are the true determinants of high-quality services. It is they who deliver high quality for patients and clients.

I am strongly committed to the principle that health and social care services should be driven by and responsive to the needs of patients, clients and their carers. I believe that truly high-quality health and social care services can be achieved only when they are properly resourced and designed around the needs of the people who use them.

I recognise that some people are anxious and concerned about the future of our services, especially in the present financial climate. I understand and share that concern, but, with strong leadership, involving people and

effective planning, I believe that the challenges that we face can be met.

The vision that I have for the future of health and social care is one that will drive up the quality of services and outcomes for patients, improve outcomes and enhance the patient experience. I want to ensure that service users are at the heart of everything that we do. Patients are entitled to receive the right care in the right place at the right time. They are at the centre of my policies and priorities. The design and delivery of services that meet their needs and expectations is what really matters to patients.

One of my key objectives, which I frequently refer to, is to develop an enhanced role for primary care, working hand in hand with healthcare providers and patients in designing and delivering consistently high-quality, safe and needs-based care in the community settings.

I am well aware of the concerns of the local population regarding access to acute hospital services, including accident and emergency. However, I am now making the services on the two sites work better, through the development of larger, more specialised teams, resulting in a higher standard of care for acutely ill patients. The development of a new A&E site and 24-bed unit at Antrim hospital was badly needed and should have been taken into consideration before the closure of the Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey units by my predecessor.

Acute services are available at Antrim Area Hospital and Causeway Hospital, supported by Mid-Ulster and Whiteabbey as local hospitals. Whiteabbey Hospital offers a wide range of services to the local community, including minor injury services, day case services, outpatient services, speech and language services and inpatient rehabilitation beds. The changes in service provision have been implemented across the Northern Trust to ensure the provision of safe, effective and high-quality services that are sustainable into the future.

I am delighted that work is progressing on the construction of the new emergency department and the 24-bed ward at Antrim Area Hospital. When the current accident and emergency department was built in 1994, it was originally meant to cater for 45,000 attendances. As we know, the shape of our health service has changed significantly over the past 18 years, and, no doubt, the delivery of services will continue to change over the coming 18 years.

I visited the accident and emergency department at Antrim hospital and met the staff and saw at first hand and recognise that there is a high level of activity in the current A&E department. I welcome the various measures that have been introduced to improve services for patients in the meantime, and my Department will continue to work with the trust and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) to identify any barriers to improved services and suggest changes to address those.

The new emergency department will be a purpose-built, state-of-the-art facility, which will incorporate the latest designs and innovations to meet the clinical standards required for a large emergency department, and it will cater for 90,000 attendances. I am also aware of the pressure for beds at Antrim hospital. The trust has acted to address that by introducing 14 temporary beds. The new 24-bed unit, which is due to be operational next June, will help to meet the pressures.

My aim, under Transforming Your Care, is to provide the full range of health and social care services outside the acute sector — in the community and closer to people's homes, thus supporting an increasing number of people to live independently, preferably in their own homes, for longer, promoting good health, reducing unnecessary hospitalisation, improving chronic disease management and allowing for early diagnosis and treatment.

I had the privilege of visiting a senior citizen in Islandmagee. He was approaching 90 years of age and had lost his wife quite recently, and he was very complimentary about the care that was being offered and delivered to him. By the way, that care was being delivered to him by a private company. I hear what some Members say about the private sector and its role in healthcare, and I often remind them of the big 20-bed geriatric wards in the old hospitals and the care provided there, and of the care that is often being provided in the private sector, which is considerably better.

We are making a £25 million investment in a health and care centre in Ballymena on the old Braid Valley Hospital site. It will include GP services, acute outpatient and diagnostic services and multidisciplinary teams under one roof. When that facility opens in 2014, it will allow a number of services to be delivered outside the hospital setting by integrated multidisciplinary teams involving staff from primary and community care and will ease the pressure on Antrim hospital to some extent. Primary care professionals from a range of disciplines, including GPs, will work together

employing modern equipment and advanced technologies to provide enhanced services that are accessible and responsive to client and patient needs. Services can include diagnostic and other services, which were previously only available in hospitals.

Some of the current primary and community estate is in very poor condition. That is the case with the health and care centres in Carrickfergus and Larne.

5.45 pm

I recently visited Carrick health centre and met the staff there. I recognise and appreciate the good work that GP practices and other professional staff provide to patients in the Carrick and Larne areas. Unfortunately, when the health estate was being reviewed under the previous Administration, Carrick and Larne did not appear to fit in at that time with the provision of new primary care facilities. I am actively looking at alternative funding options, because it is very difficult to stop other programmes and change those around, and I am very keen to address the issue in Carrickfergus and Larne, in the absence of it having been addressed in the last round of capital funding.

I have established a health infrastructure board, comprising officials from my Department, the Health and Social Care Board and the Strategic Investment Board, to assist me in that process. A programme of work is being developed that will explore the use of private finance, in addition to public capital, for new facilities. That is there of necessity. Again, Members can criticise the private sector, but we would not be able to deliver some of those programmes without it. Schemes progressed under a privately financed model can proceed in parallel with public capital developments, and that enables the delivery of a range of schemes to be progressed, subject to business case approval and value for money being demonstrated.

Another key issue is the provision of supported living accommodation. In the east Antrim area, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust intends to develop more supported housing, and proposals have been developed to provide supported living accommodation in, for example, the Greenisland area. The trust has been meeting a well-established stakeholder group in the Greenisland, Carrick and Newtownabbey areas to take forward a replacement capital scheme for Greenisland House, which is a trust-operated residential home. The process to bring that scheme to fruition is moving along, with positive

involvement from colleagues in the supported living branch in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I understand that the capital scheme is listed in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive programme for delivery in 2014-15.

Inver House was mentioned. It is an 18-bed intermediate care unit with 14 rehabilitation beds and four palliative care beds. The medical cover for those beds is provided by local GPs, supported by Dalriada urgent-out-of-hours doctors. The rehabilitation beds are for patients who no longer require to be cared for in an acute bed but need a further period of rehabilitation. The four palliative care beds are for patients who require symptom control and management that cannot be facilitated in a community setting. Those beds are supported by members of the hospital's specialist palliative care team as required.

The members of the Larne primary care integrated team are currently based in three locations: Larne health centre, Moyle medical centre and Moyle community services centre. Those community teams are relocating to Inver House to occupy the upper floor. Capital funds have been agreed to undertake the refurbishment of the upper floor, and work will be completed by the end of the financial year. No decisions have been made on the final shape of services in East Antrim.

In relation to out-of-hours services, the Health and Social Care Board launched a public consultation on the strategic framework for GP out-of-hours services in June. The purpose of that framework is to facilitate the development of future provision of GP out-of-hours services across Northern Ireland. The framework focuses on how access to GP out-of-hours services can be simplified and how more opportunities to align those services with other healthcare services can be maximised and made efficient.

At the same time, it is also worth ensuring that safe and effective GP out-of-hours services are available to all across our Province. GP out-of-hours services are a vital component of the health and social care system. As a first point of contact for the public, they provide urgent advice, care and treatment at times when GP surgeries are closed. The consultation on the strategic framework reflects the need for GP out-of-hours services to evolve and develop in order to accommodate the changing healthcare system in Northern Ireland.

The recently published 'Transforming Your Care' report proposes changes to the way in

which health services are delivered in local communities. The need to provide the right care in the right place at the right time is a key principle of the changes, and the development of GP out-of-hours services across Northern Ireland will be an essential component.

The public consultation will enable health and social care staff, the public and key stakeholders to contribute their views to the future design and configuration of GP out-of-hours services. That consultation started in June and was due to close on 28 September. However, to ensure sufficient time for responses to be submitted, it has been extended and will now close on 19 October.

A key aim of Transforming Your Care is to bring health and social care services closer to people in their homes and communities, moving services out of hospitals where it is safe and appropriate to do so. The shift left that Mr McDevitt referred to is one that we are committed to, and it will include a more personalised approach to care and an emphasis on moving resources towards prevention and health promotion.

Mr McDevitt raised the issue of telehealth and telemonitoring, and he had the privilege of going to Larne and meeting a gentleman who had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. He was a real success story in terms of non-attendance at Antrim A&E and non-admissions to that hospital, where, in the previous two years, he had had a large number of attendances at A&E and a number of admissions to the hospital.

Mr McMullan, quite foolishly, asked whether we would be spending the same money on keeping people in their own homes as we would in nursing homes.

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

Mr Poots: Oh, sorry, I thought I had 15 minutes. I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ten minutes.

Mr Poots: For some it will cost £200 and for others £800, so it would be illogical to spend the same on everyone. I had other points to cover, but I apologise for running over my time, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I did my best, Minister.

Adjourned at 5.51 pm.



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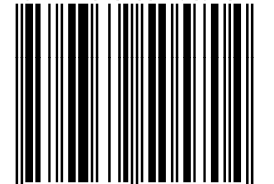
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