
OFFICIAL REPORT

(HANSARD)

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NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Tuesday 23 September 2008

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Inland Waterways Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement about the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in inland waterways sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): With your permission, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in inland waterways sectoral format.

The meeting was held at the Radisson Roe Park Hotel, Limavady, on 4 July 2008. The Executive were represented by Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, MP, MLA, and me, and the Irish Government were represented by the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Éamon Ó Cuív, TD. The statement has been agreed with Minister Murphy, and I make it on behalf of us both.

Mr John Martin, chief executive officer of Waterways Ireland, provided a report on developments since the previous meeting in October 2007. We were pleased to note the content of his report, in which he outlined the continued progress on the restoration of the Royal Canal and explained that an additional 86 metres of public moorings were provided on the Royal Canal and the Shannon.

Since the end of August 2007, 283 metres of moorings have been provided on the Erne system and a 36-metre floating mooring and gangway was installed on the Lower Bann. Waterways Ireland's accessible sailing initiative was launched at the London Boat Show in January 2008 in the company of the then

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Edwin Poots, and Minister Ó Cuív.

Furthermore, Waterways Ireland exhibited at the Earls Court Boat Show in December 2007, and the Lakelands initiative is being actively promoted. Ministers were pleased to hear that work on the new Waterways Ireland headquarters is on time, on budget and due for completion this month.

The Council reviewed progress to date on the restoration of the Clones to Upper Lough Erne section of the Ulster Canal and noted that Waterways Ireland carried out consultations with the Clones Erne East Partnership and landowners, and also had discussions with various relevant statutory agencies.

Ministers noted that Waterways Ireland commenced procedures to have the preliminary design undertaken and also that it proposed to take forward the land acquisition in advance of letting the contract. Waterways Ireland presented its revised future plans for consideration. We discussed its revised business plan for 2008 and noted that the targets and budget will continue to be reviewed throughout the year. We also noted the impact of currency fluctuations on the value of the allocations.

We heard and noted Waterways Ireland's capital investment proposals for a programme of activity under the capital expenditure plans contained in the national development plan 2007-2013. Those proposals include the completion of the reopening of the Royal Canal to boating traffic in 2009, and completion of investigations and construction of extensions on the Shannon navigation. The proposals also include the consolidation of other existing navigations by improving access to facilities and infrastructure, carrying out feasibility studies and preliminary design work on additional projects that might be taken forward if sufficient resources become available. Waterways Ireland also intends to undertake preliminary investigations on a number of other waterways. The Council noted the Waterways Ireland annual reports and accounts for 2006, which were presented on 4 July 2008, prior to being laid before this Assembly and the Oireachtas.

The Council noted that Waterways Ireland has commenced a pilot study to assess the resources and the processes required to register all of its property. We also noted that a tender has been awarded in respect of a pilot property registration of two areas of the canals in Dublin. The Council agreed to proposals for one compulsory purchase order and a number of disposals, all of which were in Minister Ó Cuív's jurisdiction.

Ministers welcomed Waterways Ireland's tourism and marketing initiatives, which include the key objectives of developing Waterways Ireland's corporate identity; promoting greater use of the waterways; awareness creation; and the building of platforms for sustained market development. The Council agreed

that its next meeting in the inland waterways sectoral format would take place in October 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In February 2008, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure met representatives of Waterways Ireland. In April 2008, the Committee met the Blackwater Regional Partnership, which is an alliance of local authorities from Armagh, Monaghan and Tyrone. Both bodies made a strong case for the reopening of the Ulster Canal and emphasised the tourism and economic benefits of that. I welcome the fact that that was discussed at the meeting.

When the issue of the reopening of the canal was discussed, were any timetables or timescales detailed to take the project forward? When will the contract be let?

In an individual capacity, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I apprise the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, that the Sam Maguire cup is safe and well; back home in the O'Neill county after an epic encounter. Yesterday, the Minister will have received a number of representations for civic receptions in Parliament Buildings; one from the deputy First Minister and another from me, via a telephone conversation with the Minister's office. Having spoken to many sportspeople and followers of Gaelic games yesterday, I know that there is concern about the Minister's political comments. The Tyrone team will be going through the front door of Parliament Buildings.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that he should ask questions that are related to the Minister's statement.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The question in the Member's contribution was in relation to the Ulster Canal.

Waterways Ireland is involved in a procurement exercise to engage a consultant to undertake preliminary design work. A call for expressions of interest was published on 15 May 2008, with the deadline for replies being 16 June 2008. From that process, a list of six consultants was compiled, and they will be asked to submit proposals based on the brief for the works. Waterways Ireland expects to appoint a consultant later in the autumn.

In addition, Waterways Ireland consulted the major statutory authorities on both sides of the border, including the roads agencies, the planning authorities, local councils and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency. Forty-six of the 49 known landowners along the route of the canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne have been contacted and advised about the canal proposal. Furthermore, Waterways Ireland has appointed an internal project manager, who will act as liaison

consultant on the project. I hope that I have answered the Member's queries about Waterways Ireland.

The other points he raised have no connection with Waterways Ireland but are connected with the sporting element of my responsibilities. As I indicated yesterday, every request, whether for a meeting or reception, will be considered. I said that when I was appointed, and I repeated it yesterday — all requests will be considered.

I hope that the urgency with which requests concerning the sporting element of my portfolio were made will be repeated when dealing with Executive business. I expect to hear such urgent matters being dealt with equally speedily.

Mr McCausland: Will the Minister provide Members with an update of the community balance of employees in Waterways Ireland? Protestants have always been under-represented, and I would be grateful if the Minister would give details of the current situation.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member's question is relevant and timely. Waterways Ireland, in common with other employers in Northern Ireland, is required to monitor its staff's community background. The position as of 1 September 2008 — so, obviously, these figures are up to date — is that Waterways Ireland had 76 permanent employees based in Northern Ireland. Of those, 26 had a Protestant community background; 46 had a Roman Catholic community background, and four were described as others. Therefore, the percentage composition of the workforce was: 60·5% Roman Catholic; 34·2% Protestant; and 5·3% other or not stated.

In the most recent census, the community background split in the Fermanagh District Council area, which is the catchment area for most of Waterways Ireland's staff, was 58% Roman Catholic and 39·8% Protestant. When Members talk about equality, they should be aware that I am very interested in that subject and have campaigned for it for many years. It is obvious that appointments must be made on the basis of merit, because that is the only basis on which people must be recruited, but, in situations in which there is a small under-representation — which there is in Waterways Ireland — I will keep that matter under the closest possible scrutiny. I wish to ensure, as much as possible, that people are offered employment using the merit principle and that staff in that organisation, like those in all others, reflect the community background spread as closely as possible.

Mr K Robinson: It is ironic that the Minister's statement about such work can be brought to the House when the Executive, which is part of this Government, cannot meet to deal with the bread-and-butter issues that concern our constituents.

I am disappointed that the only concrete progress that appears to have been made, although welcome, is on the Royal Canal around the Dublin area and in the west of Ireland.

The Minister said that 46 out of 49 landowners around Lough Erne have been contacted about the potential of the Clones Erne East Partnership making progress on that part of the extension to the system.

Did any discussion take place about extending the navigable system from Maghery along the River Blackwater, to the upper reaches of the latter, that would enable an approach from both sides? It appears that all the movement is taking place south of the border. I know that, in the long term, those developments will link up with changes that will be made in the Northern Ireland section. However, little progress seems to be being made there at present.

10.45 am

I will raise my concern in a question to the Minister: in the light of pressures on public-expenditure budgets in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, was the need to revisit Waterways Ireland's potential budget discussed?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the honourable Member for his question. He refers to irony at the same time as he talks about "concrete progress" on waterways. I am sure that the mixed metaphor will not be lost on other Members.

The Member is right to say that significant progress has been made in the Irish Republic. It is right and proper for that country to make that progress. The North/South Ministerial Council must see progress in both countries. I, as a Minister in this country, share Mr Robinson's desire to see further development, and not only on the waterways about which he spoke. I hope that a process with that objective will begin at the next NSMC meeting in the inland waterways sectoral format.

I also want to see progress being made on the development of the Lower Bann in order to permit a link-up across Ulster that will incorporate the Ulster Canal and other waterways under which I have jurisdiction. I also want to see sensible, active commercial promotion of those waterways. Therefore, the honourable Member has raised a serious issue that requires significant resources, which we must review in the light of ongoing budgetary constraints. However, I am well aware of the issues and want to promote the development of waterways. I trust that I will get support from across this House in doing so.

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Minister outline the proportional capital and revenue costs of Waterways Ireland's new headquarters to each Government? Does he believe that those costs represent value for money? Furthermore, will the Minister give a commitment to

the House that he will continue to attend, and participate in, North/South Ministerial Council meetings?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I did not know that there was any uncertainty about my future attendance, other than from parties other than the Member's party and mine, which are currently preventing Executive business from proceeding and, consequently, preventing the North/South Ministerial Council from meeting. I am not preventing that, and I know that the honourable Member's party is not. However, that is a matter that must, and I hope will, be resolved.

In an earlier answer, I mentioned that urgent correspondence can be received within hours of a sporting event's taking place. I trust that we can resolve more serious business within days. I await a speedy response on that.

DCAL funds 100% of capital costs of navigational work. The Department pays nothing towards capital costs in the Irish Republic. By agreement, the Irish Government fund 85% of non-capital costs, while the Northern Ireland Executive pay 15% of those costs.

Dr Farry: First, to give Mr McElduff a look-in, I hope that one day the Sam Maguire will be able to come North through the inland waterways network rather than by road. I hope that the trophy's journey will be to County Fermanagh, the home of my ancestors.

I have two questions for the Minister.

First, how do we ensure that there is an input into the NSMC deliberations from the Ministers with responsibility for tourism in the North and South respectively?

Secondly, is it possible to ask the Government of the Republic of Ireland to make a contribution towards the cost of the elite facilities that we are developing in Northern Ireland as a result of the national development plan, particularly those that are based around inland waterways, for example, those planned for the Upper Bann area? Such a contribution would recognise that the facilities will not just benefit citizens of Northern Ireland, they will help those from the Republic of Ireland who, undoubtedly, need assistance to match the wonderful achievements of local residents in the field of sport.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member's ingenuity knows no bounds.

The Waterways Ireland marketing and promotion strategy was launched in 2004 and will be reviewed in 2009. Waterways Ireland has a marketing advisory group, which, this year, decided to continue with the implementation of the existing strategy. Members will not be surprised to hear that the strategy has five marketing objectives, which are: awareness creation; development of a corporate identity; promoting greater use of the waterways; working in partnership with

other bodies; and building a platform for sustained development.

The key objective is working in partnership with other bodies, because virtually everyone will agree that we are years behind other regions of the UK and other parts of Europe in the promotion of our waterways as a tourist destination. We must be active in that, but sensitive, because environmental concerns must be considered. My Department and Waterways Ireland will be working with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and with Fáilte Ireland on the cross-border aspect, to ensure that we get the most bang for our buck, to use that awful phrase that was coined in America.

As yet, we have not discussed the elite facilities with the Government of the Irish Republic. I know that the Member has a strong interest in those facilities, given that he is a resident of the borough that will receive the first of them under the elite programme. We will review the programme as it unfolds, and will want to consult the Government of the Irish Republic and discuss any cross-border aspects.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that Waterways Ireland also intends to make preliminary investigations into the development of other waterways. Will the Minister state whether any progress has been made into establishing a navigational authority for Lough Neagh so that that area can be developed as a tourist and recreation authority?

The statement refers to the impact of currency fluctuations on the value of allocated budgets. Is the Minister confident that the budget for the scheme will be sufficient, given current economic difficulties?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is exceedingly difficult to give a definitive and comprehensive answer to both of the Member's questions, because — as the Member probably knows — the Lough Neagh area involves several landowners, so there are administrative difficulties in promoting that waterway. However, it is vital that we ensure that that fantastic facility is developed by active promotion, particularly the areas around the Lower Bann and the other waterway stretches that go into the Lough.

The currency fluctuations have created considerable problems, simply because resources are allocated at a given point in time with a given currency exchange rate. When that rate changes, the value of the budget either increases or decreases, depending on the movement. That is very difficult to anticipate and is a challenge for Departments both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, but we must rise to it.

Mr Brolly: I have a particular interest in the section of the waterways between Clones and Upper Lough Erne. I have been told that it will be expensive to reinstate that section of the waterways, given the development that has taken place there over the years.

Does the Minister agree? Further to that, does he have any idea as to what the cost to reinstate it might be?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member is correct in assessing that it will be expensive; all the work in all the waterways will be expensive, and we must endeavour to ensure that we have the resources for their development, promotion and maintenance. I do not have an estimate of the cost to hand, but I will obtain one and forward it to the Member in writing.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is it possible — or too early, perhaps — to ascertain how tourist numbers and boat usage have increased as a result of the work that Waterways Ireland has done on the canals, particularly on the Erne and the Lower Bann?

Members are aware of the credit crunch and how it is hurting many people. The Minister's statement referred to currency fluctuations. Has his Department ascertained whether they are having an effect on the number of people who are using the canals and, therefore, on tourism potential? Is it wise to consider spending a lot of money on this project when the economy is as it is?

The North/South Ministerial Council agreed a proposal for one compulsory purchase order. Will the Minister give some detail on what that refers to?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, you have a few questions to answer.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It appears that ingenuity is spreading throughout the Chamber. Tourism numbers is an issue primarily for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Fáilte Ireland. I am not aware of the numbers, but I will forward them to the honourable Member if I obtain the figures from both organisations.

Mr Shannon asked about promoting the entirety of the waterways in the environment of a fluctuating currency. That provides a challenge, but it is no different a challenge to that faced by tourists going anywhere in central Europe. When discussing a different aspect of my portfolio yesterday, I made clear that I am in favour of international development. I want to promote good relations between this country — our country — and the Irish Republic. If we can achieve that by getting tourists into the Republic and bringing them here — and vice versa — it should be done, because that is most definitely a win-win situation.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. It is positive, and it comes at a time when there is some kind of cloud hanging over this place. I am pleased also that the Minister anticipates further meetings, because I would not want this to be the last will and testament of Waterways Ireland. The project is long term, and it will require years of planning. I imagine

that the first boat that comes from the River Shannon to the Lower Bann will be as welcome as Sam Maguire.

The Minister will know from his discussions with developers and investors that they need to know when this wonderful event will happen. Given that tourism is our only growth industry, can the Minister gaze into his crystal ball and give us some idea of when the hotels and the other infrastructure — particularly in the Upper Bann, in which he and I have an interest — will be in place, so that the thousands of jobs for Protestants and Catholics will be created?

11.00 am

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: It is not often that the honourable Member asks me to help dispel the clouds of doubt that hang over anywhere. However, he has asked me to do that and I am happy to be of assistance. Hopefully, I will be able to do so.

On a more serious note, the Lower Bann requires a considerable amount of work done to it. It is a fantastic asset, and one that has been completely underutilised and underdeveloped. It will take a significant amount of resources to develop it in the way that he, I and all the Members of the House would like to see it developed. That development is work for the future, and it is work that I want to raise at an early NSMC meeting. Hopefully we will be in a position to do that, and hopefully last wills and testaments are a long way away.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement from the Minister. Given the huge amount of resources required to develop the Ulster Canal, can the Minister outline the economic potential for the tourism industry?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Ulster Canal is a phenomenal asset. It is not just an asset for the people who live near it and would use it following its development; it would bring considerable benefit to everyone in Northern Ireland and to Northern Ireland plc. However, there are sections of the Ulster Canal for which feasibility plans have not yet been forwarded, and I want to address that before making any further comment.

The development of all of the waterways of Northern Ireland would require funds in excess of £100 million, and the development would take many years. That is a significant amount of money — money that I do not currently have access to.

These are challenging targets and prospects for the future that we must not lose sight of and which we must actively aim to achieve. The Ulster Canal is central to that and, over the next few years, I want to target development along the lines that the Member and others have itemised. Hopefully then we can reach the desired conclusion.

Lord Morrow: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Mr Shannon has touch on one of the questions that I wanted to ask. In relation to the work that may take place on the River Bann — and the Upper Bann in particular — I hope that the development will enhance salmon fishing, and that it will not have a detrimental effect.

The Minister said that the Council has noted that Waterways Ireland has commenced a pilot study to assess the resources and processes required to register its property. Will that pilot study also include an evaluation of all its assets? Furthermore, in relation to the disposal of any assets — whether in Dublin or here — are those assets to be jointly owned by both jurisdictions? Moreover, what mechanism will be used for the transfer of those assets from Government agencies to Waterways Ireland?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: My understanding is that the assessment will include the issues that the honourable Member has raised. I know the Member has a deep and abiding interest in fishing as a confirmed and long-standing fisherman — the success of which I do not know, nor will I endeavour to ascertain today. However, in all seriousness, it is something that we are looking at. I will respond in writing to the Member at a later date and will provide him with the minutiae of detail that his question demands.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

North/South Ministerial Council

Language Body Sectoral Format

Mr Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that I have received notice from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that he wishes to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in language body sectoral format.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr Campbell): I wish to make the following report, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on the second North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in language sectoral format since the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. The report has been endorsed by Conor Murphy MP MLA, and the meeting was held in the Radisson Roe Hotel, Limavady on 4 July 2008.

I represented the Northern Ireland Executive as Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, along with Conor Murphy MP MLA, Minister for Regional Development. The Irish Government were represented by Eamon Ó Cuív TD, Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. I chaired the meeting, which dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies: Tha Boord of Ulster Scotch, the Ulster-Scots Agency; and Foras na Gaeilge, the Irish language agency. The Council noted the progress that both agencies had made since the last meeting, and I will summarise the main points relating to the three issues that we considered and approved.

The Council approved the business plans for 2008 and corporate plans for 2008-10 for Tha Boord of Ulster Scotch and Foras na Gaeilge. The Council agreed budgets for 2008 and noted indicative budgets for 2009 and 2010, which will be subject to further discussions between the sponsor Departments and to budgetary considerations by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government.

The Council also noted the proposal to provide further additional funding of £1 million to the Ulster-Scots Agency in 2009 and 2010, and that the Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs is positively disposed to that proposal — subject to budgetary considerations in both jurisdictions and assurances about the necessary financial accountability systems being in place in the agency. The Ministers requested officials to prepare a more developed paper on that subject, which is to be brought before the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format.

On the issue of staffing, the Council noted the progress made in relation to the NSMC decision of March 2006 that 30 staff posts of Foras na Gaeilge

should be located in Gweedore, County Donegal. The Council approved the staffing submission for seven posts in Foras na Gaeilge, which concerned the filling of five posts in the organisation located in Gweedore and two in Belfast. We also agreed that the working group, which is made up with representatives from Foras na Gaeilge and the two sponsor Departments, should continue its examination of the Foras na Gaeilge staffing complement and report back to Ministers on further progress at the next NSMC in language sectoral format.

The Council also discussed Colmcille, an organisation that is funded equally by the Administrations in Northern Ireland and Scotland to develop stronger links between Gaelic speakers. At the previous North/South Ministerial Council in language sectoral format, Ministers noted the work that had been undertaken to move Colmcille under the aegis of Foras na Gaeilge in Ireland and Bòrd na Gàidhlig in Scotland. The council asked officials to continue their work in examining the issues arising, and future options, and agreed to consider the matter further at its next meeting, on the basis of a report prepared by officials. A further submission outlining the future arrangements for Colmcille was considered and, at the meeting on 4 July, Ministers approved the transfer of the organisation's functions, staff and funding to Foras na Gaeilge. It was agreed that Foras na Gaeilge and Bòrd na Gàidhlig would form a partnership to take forward the aims and objectives of Colmcille.

Minister Ó Cuív stated his intention to host the next NSMC meeting in language sectoral format in a location that would have significance for the work of the language body — possibly in Donegal. The Council agreed to meet again in language sectoral format in November 2008.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas seo agus roimh an chruinniú fosta. Tá ceisteanna agam don Aire, agus, ní nach ionadh, tá suim agam go háirithe i bhforbairtí straitéis na Gaeilge a chur chun tosaigh.

I welcome the fact that the meeting took place and that the Minister has presented a statement on it. However, why was the statement delayed? When Members entered the Chamber at 10.32 am, we were in possession of his statement on Waterways Ireland but we were not in possession of his statement on the language body. The delay in our receipt of that statement was unnecessary. The Committee would like to have had access to the document a lot sooner.

Edwin Poots, the then Minister, attended a meeting of the Committee eleven months ago — 25 October 2007 — to brief members on consultations on

proposals for Irish-language legislation. He attended another Committee meeting on 25 January 2008, during which he said that his Department was considering drawing up a strategy that would protect, enhance and promote the development of the Irish language and Ulster Scots as required by the St Andrews Agreement Act 2006.

Was that strategy discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting on the language body? What progress has the Minister's Department made in drawing up the strategy? When can the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure expect to receive a briefing on the Department's proposals regarding a positive strategy for the enhancement and promotion of indigenous languages, not least the Irish language and Ulster Scots?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member began his question with a complaint about delay — and I am sure that the irony of that will not be lost on many people. Those people who have spent three months holding up the work of the Executive now have the temerity to say that there has been a delay of a few minutes in receiving a report.

I ensured that the same advance notice was given for this statement as for my statement on Waterways Ireland. Half an hour before I was to get to my feet to speak, the statements were to be put into Members' pigeonholes. There is no distinction between the two statements in that regard, yet I did not hear any complaints about a delay in the receipt of the statement on Waterways Ireland. As I said, the irony of the situation will not be lost on many people.

I turn to what the honourable Member said about languages. There were discussions on how we should promote a language strategy. I hope that I will be in a position to go to the Committee in the next few weeks with an outline of the progress that has been made in developing the language strategy. I cannot be exact about when that will be because of the uncertainty that surrounds the business of the House.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McNarry): Regarding funding for the Ulster-Scots Agency, the report indicates a need for a more developed paper on the necessary financial accountability systems in use in that agency. Will the Minister elaborate on that?

As the Chairperson of the Committee was given substantial leeway to talk about Tyrone's winning of the Sam Maguire Cup, will the Minister comment on the potential sporting repercussions of the BBC's atrocious 'Breakout' programme — shown last night — which glorified the Provos and portrayed the Provo junior Minister as a Cheshire cat, laughing at his part in a violent jailbreak? Will the Minister take that matter up with the BBC, and tell us how he sees the —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member for questions relating to the Minister's statement.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: I will finish with this question: how does the Minister see the potential for a terrorist shrine — similar to last night's eulogy — to be located beside a stadium on the Maze site?

11.15 am

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to refrain from straying outside the remit of the statement and to ask a question.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that the Minister heard what I said. Far be it from me to challenge you — because I am not allowed to — but you might perhaps consider the leeway that you gave a party member of yours compared with what —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure: There was no chastisement for that Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question. The chairman of the Ulster-Scots Agency attended parts of the sectoral meeting, as did representatives from Foras na Gaeilge. The Ulster-Scots Agency has been informed about the relevant financial aspects, and it accepts the need for absolute transparency and for all accountancy procedures to be in place. It is simply a matter of working that issue through the system to ensure that maximum benefit is derived from the additional money that will be allocated to the agency.

I watched the BBC programme to which the honourable Member referred, and I share his feelings of abhorrence. The programme is an appalling indictment on the BBC. No reference whatsoever was made to the murdered prison officer; rather, a platform was given to those who glorify and defend terror and violence.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Minister for his statement. I commend him for holding the meeting in Limavady, which is the birthplace of one of the greatest of all Ulster-Scots people, William Ferguson Massey, a former Prime Minister of New Zealand.

I welcome the fact that the Ulster-Scots Agency will receive additional funding in the coming years. In that context, I commend the Minister for moving towards equality of funding for Irish and Ulster Scots. I believe that we all want to subscribe to the principle of equality.

The Ulster-Scots Agency's expenditure can, in some ways, be informed by the expenditure of Foras na Gaeilge. Over the years, Foras na Gaeilge has funded a community-based newspaper and community-based

development workers, thereby promoting empowerment in the Irish-speaking community. I ask the Minister to note those initiatives and the fact that attendees at a recent Ulster-Scots conference on community vision highlighted the importance of empowering and building up the Ulster-Scots community through funding, resourcing and the employment of community-based development workers. When the Minister considers such matters in future, will he encourage the Ulster-Scots Agency to move in that direction, based on the good experience and practice of Foras na Gaeilge?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: I thank the Member for his question and for mentioning Limavady-born William Ferguson Massey, an individual of whom I and all locals are very proud.

The Member mentioned the need to ensure that the Ulster-Scots Agency receives equality of funding; indeed, I take it that his question also refers to the wider Ulster-Scots community. That issue is very close to my heart. On occasion, it annoys me to hear people demanding change as if change would benefit a sector or community that has not experienced fair play in the past. When I compare the origins, development and funding of the Ulster-Scots community with those of the Irish-language community, I see the need for change. Those people who have demanded change and waxed lyrical about it for years are going to get that change. That is what we need to see. People who demand change cannot back off or complain when they receive it. We must focus on change and ensure that there is, to quote another phrase, parity of esteem.

That is a great phrase, which will come back to haunt some people, and I intend to ensure that it does.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire inniu. Ar chúiseanna éagsúla, tá áthas orm go bhfuil an Tionscnamh Colm Cille anois faoi choimirce Fhoras na Gaeilge. Is dul chun cinn é sin.

Tá súil agam go mbeidh an chéad chruinniú eile den Chomhairle Aireachta i nGaeltacht Thír Chonaill, i nGaoth Dobhair nó i Rann na Feirste; nó bheadh sin an-fhóirsteanach.

I welcome the Minister's statement. I particularly welcome the fact that the functions of Colmcille have been transferred to Foras na Gaeilge.

With regard to the Minister's comments about parity of esteem and increasing funding for Ulster Scots, earlier this year, his Department withdrew £1 million of funding from the Ulster-Scots Academy, because it did not get its act together to spend all the money that it was allocated.

I agree with parity of esteem, but there is a lot of capacity building to be done in the Ulster-Scots

community before the academy can spend any extra money that the Minister may allocate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please ask a question on the statement.

Mr D Bradley: I welcome the creation of seven new posts in Foras na Gaeilge. How many further jobs will make up the full complement of staff in Foras na Gaeilge? When will those jobs be approved? Go raibh maith agat.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: There is no point in my pretending to understand the first part of the Member's question, because I did not, and I am not sure whether it contained any more questions than the English version. However, the Member raised a legitimate point about Colmcille, although I do not know whether he inadvertently omitted the fact that the functions of Colmcille are being transferred to Foras na Gaeilge and Bòrd na Gàidhlig. That is an excellent example of east-west co-operation, and I hope that the honourable Member simply overlooked the western part of that in his comments. As I said, it demonstrates east-west co-operation; therefore, hopefully, it will merit the support of everyone here.

The Member then went on — whether inadvertently or otherwise — to make my point about the academy and the transfer of funds. The Ulster-Scots community requires greater capacity building, and that is why we must ensure that greater resources are put into it. The honourable Member made that point, and it merely reinforces the need to get equality into the picture.

I hope that the Member will also draw from his question the inference that Ulster Scots was underfunded in the past. We have to make up for that, and that is the intent of my Department. We have made significant progress, and we will make further progress. I hope that we will have the support of all Members in doing that, because equality is a great thing, and I hope that everyone is smiling and supporting it as we move towards it. I hope that there will be no complaints, bitterness, whingeing or moaning when equality hits home hard. I hope that Members will bear that mind.

I do not have the number of outstanding posts in Foras na Gaeilge to hand, but I will write to the Member to provide him with the information.

Dr Farry: In light of all the talk of Mr Massey from Limavady, my colleague Mr Lunn has asked me to remind the House of John Ballance from Lisburn, who was the first Prime Minister of New Zealand, and was, incidentally, one of the international pioneers of giving women the vote.

On the international theme, and with regard to increasing the protection of the two indigenous languages on the island of Ireland, what discussions have there been about widening the net and looking to

commonalities with other indigenous languages, such as Scots Gaelic and Welsh, and considering examples of the international export of those languages, such as Scots Gaelic to Cape Breton Island, which is part of the province of Nova Scotia in Canada?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member made a valid and timely point. I do not want to overlook his mention of John Ballance, in the interests of balance — forgive the pun. New Zealand is an aspect of considerable Ulster-Scots interest; we have just heard about two examples of that. John Ballance was the first Prime Minister of New Zealand, and, subsequently, Massey was Prime Minister twice. There is considerable scope for development of tourism and other issues between Northern Ireland and New Zealand, and it is hoped that we will be able to promote that.

On the subject of languages, the honourable Member has given me the direction in which the language strategy must go. For far too long in the past, there were disputes about whether the Irish language was being used in a political or non-political sense, and about the lack of funding and development of Ulster Scots, rather than considering the situation in a holistic manner. We must examine our approach to languages and how they can be developed in a non-contentious way, and determine how people can embrace those languages in a non-threatening way as part of a culture that they may not have recognised decades ago, but are now happy to accept. That will be the essence of the language strategy. The Member has drawn attention to it, and I hope that when the strategy is unveiled, he will be content with it.

Lord Browne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note that at the North/South language meeting, considerable time was devoted to the discussion of Irish-language matters. Does the Minister believe that there was a fair allocation of time for discussion of Ulster-Scots matters? Does he believe that the additional £1 million for Ulster Scots will address the imbalance of funding between the two languages?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member has drawn attention to the variety of approaches that were adopted at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. Not to be flippant, as I have been accused of being in the recent past, if the outcome of any meeting was that a disproportionate amount of time had been allocated to the promotion of the Irish language, and a disproportionate amount of money were to be allocated to Ulster Scots, I would, on balance, settle for that outcome.

Mr Butler: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh ráiteas an Aire.

When the Minister answered a question from my colleague Barry McElduff, he talked about delays and people holding up issues. Will he tell the House what the hold-ups and the delays are in implementing the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which was signed up to by the British Government and was part of the Good Friday Agreement?

Will he also tell me whether the interdepartmental charter group, which DCAL heads, has met? What has it done up until now?

11.30 am

The former Minister, Edwin Poots, did not seem to do anything with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and I have not heard anything about it from the current Minister. As my colleague Barry McElduff said, my party wants to see the implementation of an Irish language Act, and we await that. However, legislation is already in place — the aforementioned European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. What has the Minister done to ensure that all Departments implement that charter and sign up to their obligations under it, as the British Government have done? It is the law of the land.

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The Member refers to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, but he will be aware that there has been no acceptance of the need for an Irish language Act, either in that charter, by the UK Government or through Executive agreement. However, there is acceptance of the need to develop Northern Ireland's various languages, one of which is the Irish language, although there are many others. As I said in response to a previous question, we must move away from standing on ceremony and making a hyper-political point about the non-introduction of an Irish language Act. That matter has been dealt with.

We must now move forward by implementing a languages strategy that will meet the charter's demands and ensure that those who want to develop their language can do so in a way that can command support from this Department, this Minister and the Executive. That, I would have thought, should be every honourable Member's objective. We are making progress towards that objective, and we will continue to do so. I look forward to seeing the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, and other Committees, meet to discuss formulation of that strategy. If Members wish, they can propose amendments as the strategy unfolds. We will then proceed with those proposals.

Mr Shannon: I echo my colleague Wallace Browne's concerns about the fact that as much time did not appear to be allocated to discussion of Ulster Scots at the NSMC meeting as was allocated to discussion of Irish.

The Minister said that seven new posts had been created in Foras na Gaeilge. He also agreed that the working group, which includes representatives from the two sponsor Departments, should continue to discuss progress made. The creation of those seven new jobs seems to be at odds with the decline in the use of the Irish language, as is evidenced by the 25% decrease in those who are studying Irish at GSCE and A level. That decline can also be seen in the Republic of Ireland. Is it wise to create seven new jobs, and to consider creating more, when Irish usage appears to be in decline?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: The honourable Member raises a relevant point, although I remind him that most of those jobs — all but two — have been created in the Irish Republic, and, as such, have no impact whatsoever on the departmental budget or the Assembly Budget. Those jobs are paid for, but not by my Department. Therefore, that is a matter for Foras na Gaeilge and the authorities in the Irish Republic. I agree with him that we need to ensure that more attention, time and resources are directed towards the development of Ulster Scots, because that is where the greater need for capacity building lies, as Mr Dominic Bradley suggested. That is where we need to engage in promotion, to generate support, and to ensure that there is adequate funding and resources. I intend to ensure that that is the case.

Lord Morrow: In the last sentence of his statement, the Minister said that the Council agreed to meet again in language sectoral format in November 2008. Is he confident that that will happen? If not, why not?

Will the Minister confirm whether some 80 languages are used in Northern Ireland? Is any time given to other minority languages?

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Some Ministers face questions with trepidation, but I could answer questions such as those all day, and twice on a Sunday.

Everyone knows why the date of the next meeting might be delayed. My statement was prepared after the Council's meeting in July, when we were hopeful that the work of the NSMC would continue and that the Executive would meet. As time has dragged on and on and on, there has been no Executive meeting, principally due to the actions of Sinn Féin. Hopefully, that situation will be resolved.

In the spirit of co-operation, let us move forward so that the days of hold-ups, literally and figuratively, are over and we can get down to the business of making both countries on the island — Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic — better places for their citizens. We should advance with a spirit of mutual co-operation and an acceptance of the right of the other to live, which was not always the case.

COMMITTEE BUSINESS

Referral of Matters to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the referral of matters to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. The Business Committee has agreed that this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 59(4)(b), this Assembly refers the following matters to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee:

(a) a review of progress on the implementation of the recommendations of, and the resolution of outstanding issues identified in, the Report on the Inquiry into the Devolution of Policing and Justice Matters (22/07/08R); and

(b) consideration of any other matter relating to the devolution of policing and justice matters. — [*The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (Mr Spratt).*]

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Integrated Schools

Mr 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 move the motion and 10 minutes to make the winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes to speak.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to review the viability criteria for integrated schools.

Despite considerable difficulties and opposition from the establishment, integrated education has managed to take root and flourish in Northern Ireland. That opposition exists despite integrated education being the preferred option for a large proportion of the population. The Alliance Party wants a resetting of the parameters to be considered in order to allow the proper development of integrated education.

Contrary to the popular perception that integrated schools receive preferential treatment in the allocation of funding, the Minister's bias is, and always has been, against integrated schools. She is specifically against the creation of integrated schools, be that through new build or the transformation of existing schools.

That is because the system being operated by officials sees integrated education as a threat to the status quo and, therefore, to the viability of existing segregated schools. The challenge is to reverse that mindset fundamentally and to make integrated education the default option. An integrated solution should be the assumption — that is what survey after survey, including the most recent 'Belfast Telegraph' survey, has indicated to be the popular option.

The Alliance Party is convinced that the integration of school systems is the most valuable step forward for society in a generation. However, it does not advocate, necessarily, the current model, of which it takes the same view as it does of the structures in this place: that any system that relies on labelling people is not sustainable in the long term. Nor does it suggest enforced integration. It simply challenges the Government to do two things.

First, ensure that all parents who seek integrated education for their children — and that has been indicated consistently by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey as being their desired option — have access to it, even if it has to be provided under a broader definition of "integration". Secondly, the Government should encourage the integrated movement by recognising, officially, that it provides the most sustainable option socially, financially and environmentally.

Viability criteria are discriminatory and flawed. First, we are stuck in a time-warped assumption of Protestant versus Catholic; can we not move forward from that? When the criteria were produced 20 years ago, "others" were ignored. They are still ignored, even though they represent around 14% of the population. Secondly, the criteria are flawed because they are frequently unrealistic. In practice, unless the catchment area is wide — for example, in a densely populated urban area — there is little chance of attaining the required mix. Try achieving a 30% Catholic threshold in much of East Antrim, or a 30% Protestant threshold on the west bank of the Foyle. It just will not happen. There is limited geographical access under the current criteria, and change is necessary if maximum access to the integrated sector is to be achieved.

Thirdly, given the basic purpose of integrated schools — to move away from division and to focus on the person rather than the label — surely thresholds are now nonsense. A significant proportion of schools' intake now comes from families who have arrived in Northern Ireland recently. There was never a good reason to put people into ethnic or national blocks. However, given the recent trend of immigration, the system has become so completely outdated that it is utter nonsense. It ignores welcome diversity in the community, including not only recent arrivals to the country, but children of mixed marriages and those who simply do not want to be labelled along any lines by bureaucrats. The ultimate nonsense is, of course, pressurising parents to sign up to a religious identity simply to meet a threshold. That runs contrary to the very ethos of shared or integrated education and works against those who want to move on from a position of stand-off.

The long-term objective of overall public policy should be the abolition of the requirement for selection using any religious, national or political criteria. If it is inappropriate for job candidates to be discriminated against on those grounds, how can it be justified for a school place? By any assessment of equality, that is blatant discrimination. The focus must be on ethos — not a neutral ethos, but a shared one — which may well, according to parental choice or demand, have a Christian basis. The criteria that constitute "integrated" must be opened up and, perhaps, the meaning of the term broadened.

My party proposes, as a temporary measure, reversal of the requirement that schools must try to prevent the smaller religious-background percentages falling below a threshold level. Instead of requiring that neither communal label should fall below 30%, the rule should be that neither should rise above 70%. That would allow for children who do not fit either the Protestant or Catholic label to be counted while

ensuring, effectively, the same level of integration that is currently in place. It would also prove the sustainability of integrated schools, which have, understandably, become the schools of choice of parents who have arrived in the country recently.

11.45 am

There are other options for shared education which may be of value, and which draw considerable parental support, as is evidenced by the recent polls in the 'Belfast Telegraph'. They include joint faith schools and shared and enhanced campuses. Although local circumstances will be a major factor in whether they are adopted, those options deserve further research.

There is a cross-cutting issue: education cannot meaningfully be separated from the shared future agenda or the cost of division. It is a fundamental building block of the 'A Shared Future' strategy, and future strategies must reflect that.

For all the progress made in integrated education and all the much-vaunted mixing of some well-known grammar schools, more than 90% of schoolchildren still attend schools with a dominant tradition making up over 90% of their school's intake. No one claims that integrated education is the only answer, but, in its broadest sense, it is the most sustainable option. It enjoys parental support and provides for a genuinely shared future from the earliest years.

The pressures of a segregated society should have been enough to see Government make far more progress on the issue of shared classrooms. The requirements of Government budgets should also have secured the status of broadly integrated education as the default option, not as an add-on sector. The issues of amalgamations, mergers, shared facilities and broad sustainability offer us another — and perhaps final — chance to get it right. That point should be built into every aspect of public policy, from the review of public administration to the new education and skills authority.

We seek enhancement, not enforcement; provision of integrated education in line with parental demand, not as a troublesome add-on. To achieve that, given geographical realities and parental opinion, we need to broaden the means by which a school may be described as "integrated", and that includes the joint faith option. We must move on from the flawed, discriminatory and ultimately nonsensical system of labelling our children in order for them to share.

In the long term, public policy should seek to promote a society that simply has no need for those terms for candidates for a place in a school. In the medium term, the focus should be on ethos, not labels; and in the short term — especially given recent demographic trends towards immigration, rather than emigration — "others" must be calculated fairly within the criteria for determining integrated status.

No party can claim to be serious about the shared future, or even about equality, if it is not prepared to prioritise this issue. I commend the motion to the House.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): I declare an interest as a member of the boards of governors of Ballymoney High School and Ballymoney Model Primary School.

My opening remarks will be made as Chairperson of the Education Committee but, if time permits, I will also comment on my own behalf.

As the Chairperson of the Committee for Education, I offer the following comments and observations. The Committee has not specifically scrutinised the viability criteria for integrated schools, but it has examined some policy areas relevant to the subject, including the Department's 'Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools', which is currently before it. My understanding of the sustainable schools policy is that when, in response to parental demand, the integrated sector seeks to establish a new school, the Department of Education applies the same criteria — including enrolment thresholds — as for other sectors. Likewise, when the Department is considering the long-term viability of a school, the sustainable schools policy stipulates that the same quantitative and qualitative criteria and indicators be applied for all sectors.

However, the Department of Education has a statutory duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education. The Bain Report recommended that the Department should explain that it is committed to facilitating and encouraging a variety of approaches to integrating education within a framework of sustainable schools. The Committee has highlighted the benefits of integrating education — as opposed to integrated schools — in the context of area-based planning of the school estate.

One benefit is the move away from integrated schools, which must have a set balance of pupil representation from the two main faith traditions, as the Department of Education prescribes, to grant-maintained integrated schools that have a threshold at opening of 30% of pupils from the minority community; and to controlled integrated schools that have a threshold at opening of 10% of pupils from the minority community, building to 30% thereafter.

Finally, the Committee for Education was particularly concerned that the integrated-school sector can establish speculatively an independent school, and subsequently get the Department to reimburse fully its capital expenditure. That runs contrary to an area-based planning approach, particularly when there are many thousand surplus school places, which can range from 50,000 to 53,000, and up to 55,000, depending on the figure that is plucked out of the air. That arrangement,

and the associated club-bank arrangements, should cease under an area-based planning approach, whereby a new school should need only to be considered as part of coherent plans to meet the educational needs of a particular area.

I now wish to make some comments as a private Member. It is regrettable that we are having this debate today, while the education system in Northern Ireland faces a crisis. It is deplorable that the Minister prefers to bury her head in the sand, despite her comment yesterday, and again today, that no confusion surrounds what will happen to P6 pupils and to the schools estate. She continues to give stated positions, yet she has not faced up to reality.

It is sad and disappointing that the party opposite is more interested in political ideology and chasing a political agenda than in prioritising the citizens of Northern Ireland, and children in particular. How many times has the Minister said that she has compassion for children and that they are at the heart of all that she does? She has such compassion for children, including those in the integrated sector, that she is not prepared to attend an Executive meeting. She has such compassion and love for the children of Northern Ireland that she spends more time in the Irish Republic, where she talks about issues that have little or no relevance to the educational estate in Northern Ireland. Therefore, the context of the debate is regrettable.

Members from the Alliance Party will not be surprised to learn that, for a variety of reasons, we will support the motion. My colleagues will outline the other reasons for that support. There should be a review, but not along the lines of that that Alliance Party Members envisage. I will leave it to my colleagues to provide detail on that.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My party broadly supports the motion. We do not do so because we are opposed to integrated education. Mervyn Storey hinted that his party is opposed to integrated education, a position on which the party has waxed lyrical in other forums. We support integrated education. Indeed, it was my colleague the now deputy First Minister who introduced legislation that has helped to sustain and support that sector through some difficult years.

Trevor Lunn outlined his views on the difficulties facing the integrated sector. A review must be set in the context of the broader educational debate. It has to be conducted under the remit of sustainable schools and area-based planning, as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education said, because we must build a modern education system for the twenty-first century. All sectors must be supported rather than alienated within the new vision that has been outlined. The education and skills authority proposes sectoral

support for the integrated sector. I do not doubt that the Minister's support for integration will continue.

It is hardly surprising, when Members look toward the future of our education system, that the debate has turned to the subject of post-primary school transfer. We should not focus simply on the transfer issue. I accept and understand, however, that it is the focus of attention in the community and of debate in primary and post-primary schools. The fact that we have the opportunity to discuss another sector — the integrated sector — is welcome, as is the opportunity to listen to the views of that lobby on where it believes that that sector of the educational system is heading.

Mr B McCrea: I agree with the Member — it is good that we can debate the subject in this way. Will the Member consider having a similar open and frank discussion about transfer arrangements? Will he encourage the Minister to bring the matter to the House so that we can have a similar open, friendly and frank discussion?

Mr O'Dowd: I will return to Mr McCrea's point.

Current figures show that 98% of parents who indicate that their first choice is integrated education achieve that choice — their children go through the integrated system. The demand for integrated education is being met. If the demand expands, it is the Department of Education's responsibility to meet that need, and the review will consider those factors. I emphasise that any review into any education sector must take place in line with the current and developing policies.

The subject of transfer has been debated in this House on numerous occasions, and I would have no difficulty with it being debated again. The LeasCheann Comhairle will be aware that the Business Committee decides which motions will be debated, and if a motion on transfer is proposed and is accepted by the Business Committee, Sinn Féin will robustly defend its position.

There is a collective responsibility upon us all to ensure that we give clarity and assurances to parents, teachers and pupils in the wider society. If the transfer issue is to be resolved — and I have no doubt that it can be — there will be a collective responsibility for all the politicians in this Chamber to take a deep intake of breath and approach it maturely. As a result of doing so, I have no doubt that we will have a successful education system of which we can be justifiably proud, and which will meet the needs of all children.

There have also been ongoing debates in the media about post-primary transfer. Parents need to be reassured about what primary schools should be doing at the moment; they should be teaching the revised curriculum. Pupils and teachers should enjoy the primary-school experience and let us, as politicians, sort out what happens about post-primary education. Primary-school education follows a steady course, and I believe that

the revised curriculum is a good course for our education system to follow. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: Parents with whom I have spoken have suggested that they intend to bring teachers in to teach their children out of hours in case there will be some form of prepared test. That seems to me to be unfair on people who cannot afford to do that. Furthermore, it is ridiculous that the nearest school that can take children from Kinallen in my constituency who achieve 20 points in their GCSEs is the Royal Belfast Academical Institution. Children, therefore, have to travel 30 miles just to get to a school that can take them. Clearly, something is not right.

If I can address the motion —

Mr Lunn: The Member has finally come to the point, and I remind Members that we are supposed to be talking about integrated education and not transfer. I am glad that the Member is getting to the point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members of the subject for today's debate. There may be other debates, but let us keep to the subject for today.

12.00 noon

Mr B McCrea: I absolutely take that point, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am now moving on to talk about the issue. Thank you for the interruption.

As a party — and we have thought long and hard about this — we cannot support the motion, because it is moving in the direction of some people having some sort of favoured status. What we believe in, as an absolute core value, is a level playing field.

Mr T Clarke: The Member said that he cannot support the motion; will he tell the House why all the Members of the Ulster Unionist Party in Antrim town supported the transformation of a school to integrated status?

Mr B McCrea: What we are arguing about, I believe, is not the specifics of transformation, but changing the criteria by which it would happen. We do not want to see a favoured status coming to any one issue; it may be that in some circumstances changing to integrated status is the right thing to do for a particular school, and we will look at it in that way.

The real problem with integrated education is the law of unintended consequences. There is a knock-on effect on the viability of other schools. Look at, for example, the Bain Report, sustainability criteria or area-based planning — you cannot take those things in isolation. It is a very complicated situation.

Dr Farry: May I say, in an effort to help direct the Member to the core issue, that when the Alliance Party talks about looking at the viability criteria for integrated schools, we are not talking about tipping the playing field in any one direction with respect to start-up

numbers; we appreciate that that is not the important issue. What we are talking about is how to count those people who are classified in our society as “others” and who are ignored by the system. Mr McCrea, who claims to be a fair-minded and sometimes, I dare suggest, liberal man, would surely wish to ensure that all sections of society are reflected when it comes to public policy-making.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has one extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I take exception to the Member's suggestion that no right-thinking person could possibly oppose the motion that has been put down. The Ulster Unionist Party is not sectarian; it is here to argue for what is best for all the people of Northern Ireland. For the Alliance Party to get on its high horse and yet deliver nothing, frankly, is a little bit rich.

The Ulster Unionist Party is for shared education, of which there are numerous examples, including the Roe Valley learning partnership. I draw Members' attention to the excellent pack produced by three primary schools in my constituency, St Aloysius, Harmony Hill, and St Joseph's. For 10 years, there were discussions about how to bring people from different backgrounds together through talking, learning and getting it right. The Minister was there at the same time as me to hear about the excellent work that they have done.

We are particularly pleased to see the suggestion in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that two thirds of people would support the idea of a shared faith school bringing together the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the transferor representatives council. We think that that model deserves further investigation and that it could revitalise the controlled and maintained sectors. We affirm our commitment to a level playing field for all and we want to ensure that a counter-productive top-down solution is not imposed. Having taken on board what other people have to say, we oppose the motion.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo inniu.

I consider the motion to be somewhat broad and ill-defined. Mr Lunn provided some clarity in his speech; it is a pity that that was not reflected in a more precise motion.

Members of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) say that they are not particularly concerned with numerical viability criteria for integrated schools. Those criteria are: 15-pupil intake in P1, increasing to 20 over five years in urban areas; 12-pupil intake in P1, increasing to 15 over five years in rural areas; and, for post-primary schools, 50 pupils per annum in urban and rural settings.

The integrated sector is more concerned with the stipulation that 30% of the intake from P1 onwards must be from the minority community, whichever that happens to be in a particular area — an issue to which Mr Lunn referred. One can see why that stipulation was included in the criteria for integrated schools. However, experience has demonstrated over the years that that is an extremely difficult criterion to fulfil in certain geographical settings. A good mix of communities is required for schools to be truly integrated, but that mix can be achieved other than with Catholics and Protestants solely.

Mr Storey: Can the Member provide an example of a maintained school that has moved to integrated status, because it seems as though there are sectors in Northern Ireland that are quite happy to stay in their own silo, yet expect others to go down a particular road?

Mr D Bradley: Many maintained schools are attended by both sections of the community and work very well on that basis — and I encourage more of that. However, I will return to the point of the debate, and away from the diversion that was introduced by Mr Storey.

There has been an influx of newcomers to Northern Ireland in recent years, and traditional definitions that we are used to hearing are totally strange to them. Their understanding and description of themselves should be reflected in the criteria for integrated schools.

Many natural supporters of integrated education object to being forced to define themselves as Catholic or Protestant. Indeed, that is anathema to them. People should not be forced to define themselves in that way, particularly in an educational context.

In the 2002 census, 14% of the population defined themselves as “other”, but that designation is not recognised in the criteria for integrated schools. If people are permitted to describe themselves as “other” for census purposes, that should be recognised in the criteria for an integrated school.

I would support the motion's call for a review of the viability criteria for integrated schools if it included a mechanism for recognising those who define themselves as “other”. Unfortunately, the motion does not do that.

There would, of course, be potential to abuse such a criterion — not that I believe that anyone seeking to establish an integrated school would sink to such depths. However, a percentage of the 30% minority stipulation could be made up of those who define themselves as “other”. Such a change, in addition to recognising those who wish to be described in that way, would facilitate parental choice.

The SDLP is strongly in favour of parental choice, and that includes integrated education. That has been

the SDLP's policy for many years, Mr Storey, and if you read our documents carefully, you would know that, but you obviously do not.

In any case, I have difficulty in supporting the motion as it stands, and I regret that Mr Lunn did not define more precisely the terms of the motion and the criteria that must be addressed.

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

Mr D Bradley: I ask the Minister to take on board the points that are made during the debate as part of the consultation on sustainable schools.

Miss McIlveen: Although I am uncomfortable with the motion and despite my reservations, I am content to support it. However, I do so for different reasons than those outlined by the proposer of the motion, Mr Lunn, and in the hope that a review will come to a different conclusion than the one for which he hopes.

The viability criteria for integrated schools must be reviewed, but that is not a reference to the 70:30 split. The criteria must be overhauled to remove the sword of Damocles that hangs over the head of controlled schools throughout Northern Ireland. The current criteria are so favourable to integrated schools, and, indeed, to Irish-medium schools that operate in a similar way, that the controlled sector cannot compete.

I criticised the use of the club-bank scheme by Irish-medium schools because of the damage that it caused to the Catholic maintained sector in the past, and the same criticism can be levelled at the scheme's use for integrated schools. If an integrated school that wants to build a new school can draw on a capital fund with favourable loan conditions, such as those that exist in the club-bank scheme, how can an existing local controlled school hope to attract pupils? Parents will, of course, send their children to a new school at the expense of a school that the Department has neglected to maintain or refurbish. I have witnessed examples of that in my constituency.

Integrated primary schools need achieve only an incredibly low enrolment of 12 or 15 pupils in year 1, and integrated secondary schools must have a 50-pupil intake for year 8. The viability criteria for integrated secondary schools were changed as recently as 2000, when the then Minister of Education, Martin McGuinness, reduced the required year 8 intake from 80 to 50. How can a school in the controlled sector hope to compete? Members should note that I said a school in the “controlled sector” and not a Catholic maintained school.

The Alliance Party now requests that the viability criteria become even more favourable to integrated schools. At present, if a school in a mainly Protestant area wants to be granted integrated status, a minimum of 30% of its intake must be Catholic. However, it

seems that that figure can be fudged to include children who come from a mixed marriage. The Alliance Party wants that to be fudged still further to bring into play pupils from other religions, non-religions or ethnic backgrounds when calculating the 30% figure.

Dr Farry: Will the Member give way?

Miss McIlveen: No; I have enough to say today without taking an intervention.

I agree with the proposer of the motion that an education sector that asks a child to declare his or her religion is fundamentally flawed, but the current integrated model does exactly that. Is Northern Ireland not supposed to be moving on from sectarian headcounts? The controlled sector does not ask children to declare their faith before being admitted to a school.

Members have heard that the current criteria are discriminatory and flawed, and I agree completely. However, changing the criteria from Protestant versus Catholic in the 70:30 split to 70% from one faith and 30% from a collection of other faiths or non-faith children does not change that. A child's faith should have no bearing on his or her admission to a school. I go beyond asking the Minister to carry out a review of viability criteria for integrated schools; I ask her to carry out a fundamental review of whether Northern Ireland can afford to sustain a controlled sector, a Catholic maintained sector and an integrated sector.

Mr Storey: There is an Irish-medium sector, too.

Miss McIlveen: My goodness, I forgot about that.

If the Assembly is truly serious about integrating education and society, along with maximising educational resources, a review of current provisions must be carried out. The Alliance Party loves to wave around the Deloitte report on the cost of division in Northern Ireland, but the multi-sector system of education does not escape criticism in that report.

I take the opportunity afforded by today's debate to call on the Minister to declare a moratorium on announcing any new integrated schools until the completion and implementation of the area-based planning review. It seems grossly illogical to continue to open new schools when the results of that review are still unknown.

12.15 pm

As we debate the issue, we should understand that the main reason that schools opt to become integrated is because of the favourable conditions under which integrated schools exist. It is about self-preservation.

Mr T Clarke: The Member referred to favourable conditions. Does she agree that favourable conditions did not apply in Antrim, where the only remaining controlled school in the borough was forced to put the question to a third vote so that it could be asked to

transform into an integrated school? That is not a favourable condition.

Miss McIlveen: It is an absolute disgrace.

The conditions fly in the face of area-based planning, and if a failing school were to achieve integrated status under the Alliance Party's proposals, it would not mean that it would cease to be a failing school. It would merely mean that the school would be propped up by the Department for longer because its criteria for existing would be easier to achieve. All that adds to the financial burden on the Department, when money could be spent on other areas that are crying out for additional funding. Among many others, those areas include special-needs education, early years and extended schools. For those reasons, the DUP supports the motion.

Mr McCausland: I will begin by picking up on some points that were made by previous Members who spoke. John O'Dowd said:

"We should not focus simply on the transfer issue."

The problem is that the Minister of Education has presented selection as the cause of all the ills of the education system. If children fall behind, or if there are funding issues, the Minister views those problems as being the fault of the selection system. Her single-minded obsession with selection and transfer has contributed much to the crisis in the education system that has been identified by several Members today.

Dominic Bradley was asked whether any Catholic-maintained schools had transferred to integrated status. He struggled with that question, and, although he managed to speak for quite a while, he could not answer it. No Catholic-maintained school has transferred to integrated status, but Mr Bradley could not bring himself to admit that. The only schools that have ever transferred to integrated status are those from the controlled sector.

Mr D Bradley: What has that got to do with it?

Mr McCausland: It has a lot to do with it, because the subject for debate is integrated schools. Dominic has a problem in that he does not like to be reminded of that fact, and he does not want it to be highlighted that not a single Catholic-maintained school has ever transferred to integrated status.

Along with Miss McIlveen, I have reservations about the motion, but I will support it, and I will do so for different reasons. I anticipate a different outcome from that which was intended by the proposer of the motion, so he should not presume that we are of like mind on the issue; we have a clear divergence of views. The motion is so vague and bland that the DUP is able to support it, with the hope and desire for a different outcome.

The problem with the education system in Northern Ireland is that an ad hoc growth of sectors has taken place over the years, to the point that a controlled sector, a Catholic-maintained sector, an integrated sector, an Irish-medium sector and a voluntary-grammar sector have all built up. I favour a comprehensive review of education provision and of the education sectors. When such a review takes place, it will be essential that commitment to equality is at its core. The point has already been made that preferential and special treatment is being given to some sectors, particularly the Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. This week, in my constituency, the Minister, unfortunately, announced the decision to transform Ballymoney Model Primary School into a controlled integrated school. When the consultation was conducted with the parents, only information on transformation was included in the ballot paper, and, therefore, an advantage was gained at the expense of the controlled sector. Yet again, there is no equality.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his contribution; his point is important and can be applied to Belfast, too. I will discuss that in due course.

I want a comprehensive review — with equality — of educational provision and the sectors, because, if we believe in a shared and better future — and that phrase is often bandied about in the Chamber — one of the core principles of a shared future is that of equality. There should be no discrimination or favouring of one particular sector.

Finally, I return to Mr Storey's point. In Belfast, a school transformation took place during a board discussion about the reorganisation of schools in that area. During discussions on the reorganisation of controlled schools, one school, suddenly, claimed it was to become integrated and, therefore, removed itself from consideration. The Minister, of course, was happy to facilitate that transformation. For those reasons, I support the motion.

Mr K Robinson: I declare an interest as a governor in Hollybank Primary School in Newtownabbey and Whiteabbey Primary School, which is naturally integrated and has been for many years.

At the beginning of his speech, Mr Lunn painted a picture of establishment opposition to, and a bias against, integrated schools. Moreover, he said that they were considered a threat to the status quo. I disagree. Mr Lunn must realise that there is a wide perception that integrated schools have been given more than a fair wind by the establishment. It is perceived that the bias is against the controlled and maintained sectors. Why else would the Irish-medium sector, as a template for its progress, choose a model that is so similar to the

existing integrated model? Those factors negate Mr Lunn's argument.

However, no sensible person rejects the idea that integration in education is desirable. It is a concept that underpins our shared future in the Province. It is good that children are educated together; through that experience, they develop relationships that build bridges in our communities and help different communities understand each other better. That will be positive and beneficial for the community in the long term.

The problem with most widely accepted ideas is that most people accept them without question. Indeed, to ask questions about the operation of those widely accepted truths is considered overly controversial and not mainstream. That leads to an abandonment of the proper scrutiny that should be applied to all our work in the public domain, which is funded by public money. We must differentiate between the idea of integration in education, which is widely accepted, and the methods of delivery, which are not.

If an idea is delivered outside the existing structures, it encourages the creation of new structures, which leads to mushrooming bureaucracy. That must come under the cold light of public scrutiny, especially in these stringent financial times. What might have passed unnoticed a few years ago, when the economy was buoyant and there was less pressure on the public pocket, must now be examined more rigorously and questioned in more depth. Several Members have called for that day to arrive sooner rather than later.

Many schools are integrated in fact, without being integrated in a system. Pupils from diverse backgrounds and from the two main communities in the Province are educated side by side and mix freely in the classroom, playground and in society. Many large grammar schools — some have been mentioned during the debate — operate under a 70:30 or 60:40 community split in pupil population and have done so for generations. However, the great and the good in Northern Ireland, and beyond, extol the virtues of the integrated sector with a capital "I", as opposed to those that have been referred to today with a lower case "i", which do not receive a penny extra or any public plaudits.

Those schools do not receive any recognition, yet they are integrated and children from different community backgrounds are educated and play side by side.

Their integration is natural and easy. It requires no additional education bureaucracy or system to keep it in place. It is an integration that is driven by education market forces and by the wish and will of parental selection. It is a testament to improving community relations and harmony.

The problem is that social engineering, education standards, efficient delivery and attainment do not necessarily make good bedfellows. If we follow an

integrated or an Irish-medium agenda — which, essentially, is a social-engineering agenda — we must be careful that we do not impair the effectiveness or efficiency of the education service, or, in the process, damage existing good practice through the diversion of funds and the impact that those agendas have on Irish-medium units in existing schools.

There is an inherent contradiction in the Department of Education's stance on the broad range of education issues. How is it possible to hold and promote a view that we must rationalise schools, have sustainable schools and combine schools in district partnerships to ensure that resources are used efficiently — as Sir George Bain recommended — and sponsor five different school systems at the same time? How can we sustain state, maintained, voluntary, integrated and Irish-language schools while espousing efficiency in the use of resources and embarking on school closures? Such a plethora of school types is a recipe for inequality and a prescription for unfairness in the allocation of resources.

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

Mr K Robinson: Is it fair to award additional funding to a school that embarks on integrated status — yet only 10% of its pupils come from a different community — while there are other schools that do not receive an extra penny; even though 30% of their pupils come from a different community?

Mr O'Loan: Dominic Bradley made the SDLP's position on integrated schools very clear — we support parental choice. Some parents want integrated education for their children, and that should be provided. Nonetheless, we find the motion strange. There is an onus on those who propose a motion to make their purpose and intention clear. Members should not have to guess what is in the minds of the proposers, but that was the position in which we found ourselves today. The purpose of the motion was made a little clearer by the initial speeches, but the Assembly should not have to wait until then to find out what a motion means.

The proper context in which to discuss viability criteria for integrated schools is within the ongoing discussions about the creation of a sustainable schools policy. That is a very important discussion — and not an easy one. The thresholds for integrated schools are already quite low. Something that I also find slightly strange about the motion is the cost of division, which the Alliance Party talks about. That party needs to consider how any alterations might add to public costs, although that issue was clarified a little in the earlier speeches.

The cost of division is a real issue, but many strange things are said about it. One could choose many different figures from the Deloitte report — and many people do. The figure of £1.5 billion is sometimes quoted, but

that is when people pick up the total cost of running the Catholic-schools sector, as if that could somehow disappear. The real cost is the weakness that is consequent in our division, which must be considered — not merely the costs of duplication and inefficiency.

The fundamental issue about integrated education is what it is for. On the home page of the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education website, there is a question asking whether integrated education contributes to peace in Northern Ireland. It is absolutely the right question, because the test for integrated education is its contribution to reconciliation. What disappoints me about the question is that it offers only two alternatives — yes or no. The situation is considerably more complex than that.

12.30 pm

Mrs I Robinson: The Member mentioned the part that integrated education has played in creating peace. Is he suggesting that the controlled sector did anything other than that; that it created mayhem and problems?

Mr O'Loan: I thank the Member for her comments. However, if she had waited, she would have heard me argue that other sectors make a significant contribution to the creation of a reconciled society. Some, although not all, people who support integrated education believe that the secret of reconciliation here is for our children to grow up together, leading to mutual understanding and to peace and reconciliation. People outside Northern Ireland have put —

Mr T Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: I will, although I may not do so again.

Mr T Clarke: Is the Member's speech following lines similar to his wife's statement about Protestants being brought up to hate Catholics?

Mr O'Loan: I will make no reference to the Member's comment.

Some of what has been proposed conforms to a seriously inadequate model. Reconciliation and stability here requires, and has always required, fundamental political change; it needs a shift in society's power balance. To a significant degree, that shift has happened, continues to happen, and must continue to happen. Achieving reconciliation here is not as simple as achieving tolerance. Certainly, different groups must tolerate each other more, but there must also be substantive change.

I wish to make a positive argument for faith schools, because that is not often done. Faith schools here are predominately in the Catholic maintained sector; however, I also wish to argue strongly for the transferor interest, because there is a danger of that interest being lost. Why should the state put money into faith schools? They are in the state's interest because they

are in the interest of society, which the state represents. Our schools and education system require values, and parents want to see values in the schools to which they send their children.

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Loan: Even with additional time, I am running out of time, so, for that reason only, I cannot give way. I ask that Mr Deputy Speaker be as kind as possible.

Church schools are valued even in countries with low rates of church attendance. Ultimately, such matters depend on what parents ask for. If parents request — and they do — the continuance of church schools, society should deliver that.

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

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Mr Poots: I support the motion, not for the reasons that its proposer gave but because of the preferential treatment that has been offered to the integrated sector for some years. Indeed, preferential treatment has been shown not only to the integrated sector but to the Irish-medium sector. That should be noted.

Northern Ireland's controlled sector was originally established with the intention of providing integrated education, but others decided to opt out of it. Since then, to a greater or lesser degree, we have had an integrated sector within the controlled sector. Many schools in the controlled sector attract pupils from almost every background.

Members who have contributed to the debate, in particular Mr O'Loan, have asked the same question as the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) asks in a poll on its website's home page:

"Do you think that Integrated Education contributes to peace in Northern Ireland?"

All schools in all sectors in Northern Ireland contribute to peace in Northern Ireland. It does not fall within the remit of a particular sector to claim exclusively that its work contributes to a peaceful and a better Northern Ireland.

All schools have a role to play in encouraging peace in Northern Ireland. All schools have a contribution to make in educating children to understand one another's ethos, and in raising awareness of what happens in other schools and other parts of society that may not be easily accessible to them. It must be demonstrated that it is nonsense to suggest that the integrated sector has some divine right to perform that function.

A school that recently opened in my constituency basically bullied its way to being granted integrated status. It first asked local schools to change to integrated status. That did not suit the three local schools, two of which had amalgamated with other schools. In one case, two schools had merged into one, while the other case involved three schools being combined. They were new schools on new sites, and, all of a sudden, the integrated sector asked them to go integrated. At the time, those schools decided that it was not appropriate to consider seeking integrated status. Campaigners for the school involved forced the agenda until they eventually got an integrated school of their own. That happened in spite of the fact that three new schools, with hundreds of available places, had been developed in that area.

Another integrated school in my constituency opposed the opening of a new integrated school. Since that new integrated school opened, it has been announced that

the other school will close. That leaves a ridiculous situation, where a larger integrated school is to close and a smaller integrated school has opened. At the same time, teachers are being paid off in the controlled sector and there are more empty places in classrooms.

We must focus on doing the right thing for our children. There are 50,000 empty school places across Northern Ireland, to which the Minister of Education often refers. How will we deal with that issue? It is good news that more children are being born than anticipated, because that will help to address the issue. There must be rationalisation in some areas. Thus far, it is the controlled sector in which rationalisation has taken place and from where there has been movement into the integrated sector.

We must see a fair and equitable sharing-out of the pain involved in rationalisation across all education sectors. The controlled sector cannot suffer alone. It cannot be argued that the maintained sector can go on for ever without significant rationalisation, when the controlled sector has suffered the consequences.

I support the motion. I want the Minister to consider the issues involved and to end the preferential treatment that the integrated and Irish-medium sectors have received, and to stop the nonsense of starting up schools with as few as 12 children. That practice should be ceased forthwith, in particular when there are empty classrooms and empty desks in the immediate area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that mobile phones should be switched off.

Mrs I Robinson: One could be forgiven for being paranoid about state-controlled schools being picked on and being told that if they do not become integrated they are on their way out. In the context of what Nuala O'Loan and Mary McAleese said about how they regard Protestants in Northern Ireland, one may believe that there is an attempt to destroy state-controlled and grammar schools and everything that we hold dear, because such schools reflect the Britishness of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

The Alliance Party promotes the NICIE guidelines and is, in a way, at the front of the campaign to see schools transformed to become integrated, because that party is hoping that that will produce little Alliance voters of the future. I support people having the right to choose, but that choice should be based on truth and equality; let us not simply pick on controlled schools.

In my constituency alone, there is evidence of the controlled sector being targeted as schools in Dundonald are being allowed to become rundown, and there are no schools along the carriageway at Newtownbreda. Despite that, we are seeing the mushrooming of integrated schools in areas where they should not be, because schools existed in those areas already and

would have been able to continue in the controlled sector had money been invested in them.

Mr Poots: Does the Member agree that it is somewhat ironic that there seems to be greater emphasis on opening integrated schools in leafy suburbs and that there are remarkably few integrated schools being opened at interface areas, where a real contribution to peace building could be made?

Mrs I Robinson: I concur with my colleague's comments. I recall that there was a dispute about the planning criteria for Lagan College and the Millennium Integrated Primary School in my constituency, as we argued that their locations were hazardous to children. Lo and behold, a few years later, after those schools have been expanded, have had Portakabins added and are getting increasing amounts of money thrown at them because they are bussing children from all over the Province — the pupils are not coming from just local schools, they are coming from areas right across the board, and controlled schools cannot offer such a service — an application has been made for road-widening schemes.

The Alliance Party in Castlereagh will defend the life of a tree should their own lives be lost in the battle, yet every tree was pulled down at Lagan College to enable the road to be widened and there was not a cheep out of the Alliance Party. We were called bigots and all sorts of things by the Alliance Party in Castlereagh and around the Province because we said that the schools were not in a suitable location because they were on little back roads in the country, but that is par for the course.

I believe with all my heart that our children should learn together; however, I do not believe that a tiny minority of children should receive preferential treatment over the overwhelming majority, particularly when that ultimately serves to jeopardise the delivery of education to those attending established schools. Although the Alliance Party might want to see the viability criteria relaxed, I contend that any such move will only compound problems that are being experienced in education and will further undermine the delivery of education to pupils.

In fact, those who wish to see true integration — in which the delivery of education to the majority of our children is not challenged or threatened — will want to see the criteria tightened up. There will be those who will, undoubtedly, react with horror to any suggestion that the integrated sector could possibly be discriminatory or sectarian.

Although integrated education might seem like a good idea, it is discriminatory and sectarian in practice. The integrated sector would not exist were it not for segregated education. Therefore, integrated schools are part of the sectarian system of education.

The integrated sector receives preferential financial and operational treatment compared to established schools, and it is, therefore, overtly discriminatory. At a time when school numbers are in decline —

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

Mrs I Robinson: At a time when the Department cannot provide established schools such as Tor Bank with the required funds to improve and expand their services — one of the most disgraceful situations in my constituency of Strangford — it is madness to spend millions of pounds on a new tier of education.

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

Mrs I Robinson: I support the motion.

Mr Dallat: I do not intend to get involved in this game of ping-pong between the DUP and the Alliance Party. I hope that all children have their radios switched off.

Mrs I Robinson: Why?

Mr Dallat: Because this is not what education is about. Having spent 30 years in the profession, I speak with a degree of experience. I spent seven years in an integrated school in Donegal, where the Protestant community was in the minority but cherished and appreciated for its difference and diversity, and the following 23 years in St Paul's College in Kilrea — a town that experienced trouble. I did not hear one sectarian, biased or bigoted remark in all those years; I applaud that school.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute to teachers in all schools, particularly the controlled and maintained schools. I do not think that they were ever thanked for the contribution that they made towards keeping children away from bigotry and the Troubles through the years. I acknowledge the work of the teachers and the boards of governors in the controlled and maintained schools who provided an oasis of peace for children who, when outside school, often became contaminated by people — including politicians — who should have known better.

In the worst of times, teachers played a vital role in steering their pupils away from trouble, away from paramilitaries and such like, and not once have they been thanked. In fact, most VIP visitors to this part of Ireland are brought first to an integrated school. That has a negative reflection on the other schools, because it suggests that only the integrated schools made a contribution. All schools made a contribution.

I wanted to say that now, because I hope and pray that the Troubles are at an end, and all people who made a contribution to peace deserve to be recognised. Teachers in all schools, particularly in the controlled and maintained sector, made a contribution that was

bigger than anyone appreciates. I make no apology for saying that.

I am not against a change in criteria for schools, so long as it does not have implications for those schools of which I spoke so highly. Some of them are under threat of closure because of the numbers game — I think that the new minimum enrolment is to be 105 for primary schools and 500 for secondary schools, but I am sure that the Minister will put me right on that. Many of those schools are in the hubs of their communities, and that is important. They make an outstanding contribution to education. That is particularly true in rural communities, where there is increasing collaboration between schools that provide education for children from different backgrounds. That is to be encouraged, and it is working successfully.

Partnerships were mentioned earlier. There are highly successful partnerships in my constituency of East Derry. Nothing pleases me more than to see children outside school, wearing different uniforms and in friendship. That is the way forward.

Community schools were forgotten in the mists of time around the 1980s, but, finally, there has been a rediscovery of the community-type schools, which reach out to the educational needs of those whom the education system missed — the 250,000 people over 16 who have problems with literacy and numeracy.

The schools that I have referred to are providing that service. The way forward for many of our schools is for them to reach out into the community, reinvent themselves as community schools, and encourage not only higher levels of literacy and numeracy but healthier lifestyles.

2.15 pm

Education is not a subject to which one can apply the principles of mass production. Each community has its own needs and wants. The education system should apply equally across the board.

When I was a teacher I used to give out lines, and I apologise for that now. However, I would love to give Mr Storey a few lines, because he never seems to keep quiet when other people are speaking [*Interruption.*]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member is in danger of receiving some lines himself.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you. I welcome the debate, and I thank Trevor Lunn for tabling the motion today. The motion and the debate allow us to consider how the strategic landscape in education is being improved for the benefit of all children, regardless of school type or sector.

I have a specific duty, which I welcome — it is to encourage and facilitate, under law, the Irish-medium

and integrated sectors. In addition to my duty, I believe not just in integrated education but in the integrating of education and I am often struck by similarities in stories between the integrated and Irish-medium sectors. Cúireadh tús leis an dá earnáil i bhfoirgnimh nár mhó ná botháin iad. Iad á dtiomáint ag tuismitheoirí a raibh prionsabal dian daingean acu. Each began in what were little more than huts, driven by parents of utter conviction; a conviction that I have witnessed at first hand during my visits.

I have visited a number of integrated schools including: the All Children Integrated Primary School in Newcastle; Omagh Integrated Primary and Nursery School; and the McClintock Controlled Primary School. Furthermore, I have opened the children's garden at New Lodge Nursery School and visited the excel club in Hazelwood Integrated College.

Additionally, I have carried out many different launches in the integrated and other sectors, and I believe that the points made by John Dallat, in that respect, are well made. For example, I launched the electoral registration week at Priory Integrated College in Holywood, and this Friday I am going to be visiting Shimna Integrated College in Newcastle. Moreover, members of the party opposite will be glad to know that Gregory Campbell and I visited Oakgrove Integrated Primary School in Derry last week.

Is saibhre iad ár bpáistí inniu de thoradh ar an dea-obair a rinne na daoine díograiseacha úd ag an tús. Our children are richer for what those dedicated individuals have given us and I want to say thanks to them all.

In today's debate, some Members mentioned diversity. I agree that we have a much more diverse Ireland — both North and South. Children from many countries in the world are coming into our education sector. However, I do not think that we should make any presumptions that they are all in the integrated sector. In fact, they are in many different sectors: the controlled sector; the Catholic sector; the Irish-medium sector, and the integrated sector. Therefore, any policies that we introduce must focus on those newcomers, and that is a presumption in any of the policies that I am examining.

Although we have the integrated sector, we also have other sectors that are integrating. I have seen tremendous work in the integrated sector, but, equally, I have seen tremendous work with the different sectors working together.

Basil McCrea referred to the diversity pack, which was brought together by three different schools in his constituency. I was at that launch. It was the culmination of years of work doing real integration work between those schools. I commend those schools for their efforts, efforts that are being replicated right across the North.

There are also 31 learning communities across the North. Indeed, I am hosting events that bring together school principals from the same area and from different sectors. We are sitting down together over a bite to eat, discussing what provisions those principals require.

I was in County Fermanagh last week and I will be in County Down this week. Some of those discussions have been very good. In some cases, the principals have told me that they, as part of the learning community, are discussing many issues, and they have found those discussions useful because everything is on the table for discussion.

We are discussing the integrated sector today, and I take on board Trevor Lunn's points. I am not going to go into the transfer issue, or any other issues, as there are many aspects of education, and I want to focus on the integrated sector.

Demand from parents for integrated education is growing. Currently, we have 58 integrated schools, accommodating over 18,000 children and young people: that is a lot of children, and they deserve our support. The motion is underpinned by an issue of great importance to education today — viability. Everybody wants viable schools: no one argues against that, and we must start with the strategic context. I am crystal clear about the big issue in education in the North — raising standards for all our children, based on equality.

I want to secure the strategic, sustainable future of all sectors. I recognise that the needs of schools in different sectors are not the same. The integrated and Irish-medium sectors are growing, while other sectors are contracting. We facilitated the integrated sector by opening new schools and supporting transformation in a unique twin-track approach. People must remember that proposals for schools in all the different sectors are brought to me — I do not initiate them.

I will seek to meet the needs of the growing sectors while taking care to consider the needs of those in which the numbers of children are falling. Education must always be about the children — all the children — and not just the schools. I consider all proposals for new schools, or changes to existing schools, with the best educational interests of children in mind.

Since becoming Aire Oideachais, or Minister of Education, I have had the opportunity to approve a new integrated nursery unit, a new integrated post-primary college and the transformation of two existing primary schools to integrated status. Whenever I have turned down requests for transformation to integrated status, or approved the closure of an integrated school, I have done so with the education of the children in those schools, and schools likely to be affected, uppermost in my mind. I do not take such decisions lightly, and all are based on sound evidence. Children deserve equality.

Many people in the North still think about schools as institutions, and that is fine, as long as we remember that the schools are there to serve the children, and that the children are in the centre. Some Members are beginning to understand that distinction and see the benefit in it for all of society.

I have asked my Department to prioritise action that I believe will address properly the duty to encourage and facilitate. That step change in support for schools, including the integrated and Irish-medium sectors, is my priority, as that will deliver what the sectors need and deserve. I am putting in place strategic actions to deliver those aims: a sustainable-schools policy; area-based planning; and the review of public administration (RPA). Those actions will support greater sharing and integration across all our schools, because a commitment to greater sharing among schools is at the heart of those policies.

Sustainable schools and area-based planning both explicitly take account of the Department of Education's duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education. They aim to put integrating across a range of diversities at the centre of the way forward across all school sectors. However, formally integrated schools will have an important part to play, and they deserve our support.

Forward planning for integrated and Irish-medium schools does not take place at the moment, and that must change. Area-based planning will provide forward planning for those two sectors. It will enhance the educational experience of the children in integrated or Irish-medium schools, and it will demonstrate a commitment to encourage and facilitate. I have ensured that NICIE and the Irish-medium sector are represented on all the working groups that I have established — whether they relate to RPA, area-based planning, or any policy that is being introduced — so that they are at the core of the decision making.

On many occasions in the past, NICIE and the Irish-medium sector were not consulted until the end of the process. The Irish-medium and integrated sectors were told to fit their schools into policies that had already been implemented. Fortunately, we have rectified that situation. The Irish-medium and integrated sectors are now taken into consideration at the beginning of the planning process.

Along with the most senior people in the Department, I am chairing a high-level group of the review of public administration. I have heard talk across the Chamber about the importance of people sitting down and planning together, and that is what I am doing. For the first time in the North of Ireland, all the different sectors are coming together around a table and planning administration on an area basis. Around that table are all the senior partners: Protestant Churches, transferors, Catholic bishops, NICIE, the Irish-medium

sector and the boards. We are taking planning and strategic planning very seriously.

The RPA will ensure that the education and skills authority provides more coherent support to schools. That will especially benefit the integrated and Irish-medium sectors. As I have said, the more that those sectors are involved in the earliest stages of planning, the better. Sectoral support will provide a voice for each sector and level the playing field for all, regardless of the number of institutions represented; it must be remembered that every institution serves children.

Sustainable schools deal with the viability issues that are common to all sectors, including stable enrolments, sound finance, strong leadership, accessibility and links with the community. There is one difference for integrated schools: the law requires that an integrated school must have a mix of Catholics and Protestants to be viable.

I mentioned ethnic minorities earlier, and I listened very carefully to the discussion about ethnic minorities. Every sector has ethnic minorities but — as Members will know — there is a law about viability and integration. Setting up a new school or approving a school transformation is a very serious commitment. In all the decisions that I make, I consider the children and the teachers in integrated schools and other schools. I will consider the impact on public finances, and I will not put the survival of an unviable transforming school above the needs of children. There are decisions that should have been taken before my tenure as Minister of Education that were not taken. Schools that are left to wither on the vine face serious difficulties, and that is simply not fair.

People claim that rationalisation is affecting only one sector. I ask those people to examine the decisions that I have made. I have not simply made decisions about schools in the controlled sector. Irish-medium schools have been closed; integrated schools have been closed; controlled schools have been closed; and Catholic schools have been closed. We can have robust political debate, but please let those debates be truthful.

I welcome the fact that integrated education is afforded a special place in law. However, religious mixing is at the heart of that special place. The current definition of reasonable numbers of Catholics and Protestants states that the minority community must constitute a minimum of 30% of the pupils. The threshold of 30% was introduced in 1996 and is based on experience. That experience shows that minorities below 30% struggle to attract more pupils from the minority community. Indeed, in some schools, the minority community shrank when it was below 30%.

However, it is important to make the distinction that we do not insist that transformed schools achieve that 30% target from the outset; that would be very inflexible.

Some people in the sector confuse flexibility with an acceptable lower standard of mixing, but that is not the case. Transformed schools are expected to increase their minority community representation from 10% to 30% over time.

2.30 pm

There is clearly no consensus in the Chamber today on the way forward. However, I will carry out a review in the Department, but it will be in the context of existing policy and legislation. I believe firmly that integrated education is a valuable contributor to our educational landscape. Its merits speak for themselves.

I will set out some of the facts about integrated education to ensure that the House is clear about the issue. There are schools in the integrated sector that have more children applying to them than they have capacity to accept. They are popular, oversubscribed schools across the sectors.

I asked my Department how many first-preference applicants to post-primary integrated schools were accepted this year. This September, 1,952 children made first-preference applications to integrated post-primary schools, of whom 1,930 were accepted. That means that 99% of those who applied to the integrated post-primary sector as their first preference found a place in an integrated school. That compares to the 84% of children who successfully applied to a grammar school. I know that that means —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister to draw her remarks to a close, please.

The Minister of Education: I know that that means that 22 children who made a first-preference application to an integrated post-primary school were not successful, and that there will have been unsuccessful lower-preference applications. However, at a general level —

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

The Minister of Education: At a general level, integrated post-primary education has the capacity to admit practically all who choose it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The Minister of Education: Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for the debate today and for your lenience.

Dr Farry: I welcome the fact that we are having this debate today. To date, our education debates have focused almost exclusively on post-primary transfer, so it is useful to move away from that and to reflect on the wider educational issues — although I do not necessarily welcome the tenor of some of the remarks made today.

It is worth stressing that integrated education is both a successful and popular form of education, and that is reflected in a succession of opinion polls that stress overwhelming support from all sides of the community

for integration and other forms of mixing in education. There is considerable demand from parents for integrated places, yet only 6% of our children attend integrated schools, a fact that many people in the rest of the world find quite bizarre.

Like the Minister, I, too, pay tribute to the work of NICIE, the Integrated Education Fund and those many hundreds of parents who have taken the initiative and tried to set up integrated schools. We have now reached that 6% threshold, and we must consider how we can take the next step and meet the demand from right across society for integrated schools. Of course, that goal cannot be achieved in isolation — we must also tackle the broader demographic crisis in our school system. Many Members have mentioned the 50,000 empty school places, and that figure is rising.

However, a fundamental mistake is being made in the system. Far too many people, both in political parties and the educational establishment, view integrated schools as a further fragmentation of an already fragmented system.

A change of mindset is needed, and integrated schools must be viewed as part of the solution. A newbuild or a transformed school — the latter being the more likely option in the current situation — would provide a much more sustainable, local solution. For example, two rural primary schools in a village may be under threat of closure. As much rationalisation is taking place on a sectoral basis, rather than across the sectors, the tendency would be to close both schools. The students from both sides of the community would then have to be bussed to schools in a different town or village. Surely we should consider a solution —

Mrs I Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Farry: Sorry. Surely we should consider having a single school in that community. Many parents would welcome such a solution.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to consider the issue further and to address the needs of the integrated sector in particular. I take much comfort from her comment that the Department may need to revisit the way in which it fulfils its duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education, because the system has been too passive in the past.

Having said that, I am concerned about the approach to the review of the viability criteria, because the Minister has stated that it will be undertaken in the context of current policy and legislation. Surely a review should be much broader than that, and it should examine both legislation and policy.

I shall now focus on how people from different backgrounds are reflected in the viability criteria. The issue of start-up numbers is not critical for the integrated-education movement — the issue is how

people are treated and counted. Pupils in the “other” category were effectively neglected from the viability criteria, which states that there should be a 70% to 30% split, which was recently changed from a 75% to 25% split.

According to Department of Education figures, around 20% of children in integrated primary schools come from “other” backgrounds, and around 16% of children in integrated secondary schools come from “other” backgrounds. Those figures include children from mixed marriages or relationships, new residents in Northern Ireland, and parents who want their children to break away from traditional definitions of identity. For example, people who come here from Great Britain, such as members of the security forces, may come from Protestant backgrounds in English terms, but they do not wish to be treated as Protestants in Northern Irish terms.

Labelling runs very much against the ethos of integration, and people make conscious decisions to send their children to integrated schools to get away from the situation that exists in Northern Ireland. However, they end up in the perverse situation whereby, in some schools, parents are pressurised to sign their children up as either Protestants or Catholics in order to meet the artificial criteria that have been set down by Government. Many people find that distasteful, and it is, ultimately, counterproductive.

We need to move to a new phase where there is no labelling whatsoever in schools. That transition can happen by counting “others” as part of the 30% minority. As long as the majority does not pass the 70% threshold, we can maintain the ethos behind the policy while reflecting the changing situation on the ground.

I welcome, with some trepidation, the DUP's support for the motion. However, that party seems to be labouring under the illusion that examining the viability criteria for integrated schools will open up the opportunity for an attack on integrated schools. I can say with total confidence that the integrated-schools movement in Northern Ireland has vitality and sustainability. Integrated schools are the most sustainable form of education financially, economically, educationally and socially. Any review will establish that.

Mr Kennedy: Has the Member had a chance to analyse the experience of Armagh Integrated College, which opened a few years ago, but now faces closure due to a lack of viability?

Dr Farry: I am familiar with some extremely successful integrated schools across Northern Ireland. However, if an integrated school is suffering and is not sustainable, it should be subject to the same analysis as schools in other sectors. In my constituency of North Down, an integrated school closed because it did not meet the criteria. Therefore, although I support integrated

schools, a blanket approach cannot be adopted whereby they are defended at all costs.

I welcome Sinn Féin's support for the motion and I stress that we are talking about a range of sectors, and within the subject of sharing, there are different options, including faith schools and shared campuses. Integrated education is probably the apex of a range of options for sharing, but all options should be put on the table. There are a diverse number of sectors that provide value in their own right.

I regret the position adopted by the Ulster Unionist Party in opposing the motion. That party speaks the language of shared education. However, once again, the rhetoric is right, but the actions are wrong, and that party has made clear its intention to oppose the further development of integrated schools.

There is no distinction between capital “I” integration and lower case “i” integration. Integrated schools are integrated schools. The other schools, which have mixed populations, are mixed schools, but have an ethos that is fundamentally grounded in one or other of the dominant traditions in Northern Ireland. It is important that people are crystal clear on that point.

I am somewhat confused by the SDLP's approach to the motion. On the one hand, it seems to agree that there is a need to review the viability criteria for integrated schools. However, because the motion does not prejudice the conclusion of a review by putting it down on paper, the SDLP seems to be intent on opposing it. Although the SDLP is going to some lengths to dance on the head of a pin on some issues, that is taking things to the extreme. I urge the SDLP to back what is, in effect, the progressive way forward for education in our society, and not to leave itself on the wrong side of such an important argument.

In response to Michelle McIlveen's remarks, several DUP politicians have weighed in heavily behind controlled schools that have sought to transform to integrated status. I am mystified why they would do that at constituency level but oppose integrated schools at policy level right across Northern Ireland. Indeed, the viability criteria will give many of the schools that seek to transform from controlled to integrated status a better chance of survival and meeting the 30% target.

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

Dr Farry: I urge support for the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to review the viability criteria for integrated schools.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Planning in Residential Areas

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

Ms Lo: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to review, and where necessary to amend, planning policies to protect the character of residential areas and to create mixed and balanced residential communities.

The issue of planning has continued to cause great concern and controversy, not only in my constituency of South Belfast, but right across Northern Ireland. Many MLAs are approached by constituents who face the frustrating prospect of liaising with the Planning Service and who feel, from the start, that they are fighting a losing battle in trying to preserve their neighbourhoods.

Both the regional development strategy and the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan promote a drive to provide more housing in urban areas and advocate an increase in the density of urban housing. However, they also caution that this should not be achieved through overdevelopment or unsympathetic housing proposals in established residential areas. In addition, planning policies provide the guidance to achieve a more balanced approach. Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS 7), which addresses the quality of residential environment, states:

"In established residential areas proposals for housing developments will not be permitted where they would result in unacceptable damage to the local character, environmental quality or residential amenity of these areas."

Planning Policy Statement 12 (PPS 12) focuses on the issues associated with making better use of existing land within settlements for housing. However, like PPS 7, PPS 12 aims to promote the increase of housing density in urban areas while also preserving residential and environmental amenity, with particular emphasis on the protection of areas of distinctive townscape character.

2.45 pm

Those who object to planning applications find that it is all too often a disparaging and fruitless exercise. The shortcomings of the Planning Service have left many serious issues to be addressed if a balance is to be struck between creating new and sustainable communities and preserving established residential spaces.

The cumulative effect of planning proposals in certain areas can have a major impact on residents. In August

2007, the then Minister of the Environment, Arlene Foster, addressed that issue in a planning circular, stating:

"The Minister wishes to ensure the established character of these areas is properly protected in line with policy objectives and that the individual or cumulative effects of proposals do not significantly erode the environmental quality, character and amenity of existing areas, for example through inappropriate design or through over development."

Mr McCarthy: Does the Member agree that, since the former Minister announced that policy, significant improvements have been made through PPS 7 in all council areas, and that we are all very grateful for that?

Ms Lo: I thank my colleague for that intervention. Overdevelopment places a huge strain on local infrastructure, particularly on road safety, weight of traffic, and parking. As the Department for Social Development's (DSD) recently introduced residents' parking scheme initiative highlights, there is already a desperate need for parking provision in urban areas.

The introduction of increased-density housing would serve only to exacerbate the problem. Overdevelopment has led to the erosion of areas of townscape character, with the architecture, size and scale of new developments not in keeping with current or long-established areas. Garden grabbing in residential areas, the loss of green space, and the illegal removal of trees can all have a detrimental impact on the environment, on account of increased density of housing.

Individuals have been placed under immense stress through the loss of privacy and daylight, and the increase in noise caused by new buildings that are crammed up against their homes. Some people have been approached by developers who use aggressive tactics or who pester them with continual offers.

The impact on established communities is easy to see when one considers the Holyland area of South Belfast — a residential area that is now swamped by apartments and houses in multiple occupation (HMO), with the associated problems of crime, antisocial behaviour and loss of amenities for families. It is unfair that applicants have the right to appeal decisions, but objectors do not. The only recourse for objectors is a judicial review, which is costly; or a complaint to the Northern Ireland Ombudsman. Both options apply only to procedural issues, rather than the decision on an application.

Piney Hills provides a good example of all those problems, and represents the erosion of an established community at the heart of South Belfast. The gradual removal of purpose-built family homes in favour of high-density apartment dwellings for individuals and couples is having a huge impact, not only on the community in residence, but on the aesthetic character and environmental amenity of the area.

Although it is situated in a conservation area, Piney Hills has been affected by the depletion of a number of established green areas, gardens and trees, some of which were subject to preservation orders that were flagrantly disregarded by developers. Some properties have been purchased and subsequently abandoned due to the slump in the housing market, causing unsightly neglect and further damage to the environmental amenity and townscape character.

In conclusion, the Planning Service needs an overhaul. A policy review is required to provide strong and clear guidelines so that there is no room for abuse or misinterpretation of terminology. A brownfield site refers to a previously developed but unused site — it does not mean that developers can participate in garden grabbing.

Better community consultation will ensure that every step of the planning process is transparent and understood by all, which will cut out unnecessary planning work and arguments. A right of appeal for third parties should be introduced for cases where a planning decision will have far-reaching implications. More powers of enforcement should be allocated to the Planning Service and the courts, so that they can impose heftier fines and penalties on developers. Stringent supervision of developments is required, and a record of offences could be kept where conditions of an application have been breached.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member agree that, in addition to the penalties that she outlined, costs should be awarded to those developers who appeal successfully?

Ms Lo: I will continue.

Mr Paisley Jnr: Will the Member not recognise that the stringent penalties that she outlined will lead to the dissipation of frivolous objections and the emergence of solid objections and that, therefore, awarding costs to those developers who successfully appeal would also be sensible?

Ms Lo: In many instances, developers railroad residents who have very little power or money to support their objections.

There should be an emphasis on quality design and construction, including preventative measures, such as flood prevention and the utilisation of renewable materials and energy. Developers should be forced to maintain purchased properties to a reasonable standard while they await a decision or when development work does not commence immediately. Perhaps, there should also be a time limit for developers to begin work on site. It should be a priority to raise the quality and volume of staff in the Department to address the slow turnaround of work.

I call on the House to support my motion, which calls for a review of planning policies to protect the

character of residential areas and to create mixed and balanced residential communities.

Mr Ross: Over the past 18 months, I doubt that any Member has not been visited by constituents who are concerned about garden grabbing. In many cases, massive apartment blocks are being built that totally change the look and feel of a local community. Not only do such apartment blocks have a visual impact, but they impact on the traffic in the area and are often built without due consideration for car parking.

This time last year, we were talking about the explosion of development in urban areas and the multitude of apartments being built left, right and centre. Not all development is bad — it is entirely necessary, and I do not advocate a blanket ban. However, it is important that when there is development in residential areas, due consideration is given to residents and the impact that the new houses or apartments will have on the local area.

It is impossible to argue that in the vast majority of cases, multiple-occupancy apartment blocks do not dramatically alter the character of the areas in which they are built, particularly when compared with streets that have been untouched for several decades. However, as building around the country has slowed down or, in some cases, stopped completely, that problem has ceased to some extent. Property investment by developers is not at its previous level when any small pieces of land were being filled by towering blocks of apartments.

In addition to the credit crunch and nosediving property prices, that decrease is due to the guidelines that were issued by the previous Minister of the Environment, Mrs Arlene Foster, which made it more difficult for developers to build multi-occupancy dwellings in residential areas. That direction had an impact, as planners paid particular attention to the Minister's circular and the impact of any new developments on the overall character of an area. That was referred to by both Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

Although the current downturn in the housing market has been acknowledged, it is hoped that it will not be the case for much longer. Therefore, it is important that when building begins again, the Minister takes practical steps to ensure that, first, the character of an area will not be unduly impacted upon and, secondly, that the environmental impact on existing amenities and drainage will not result in flooding.

Mr K Robinson: Does the Member agree that there is a particular problem in the East Antrim constituency, particularly in the borough of Newtownabbey, where, during the approach to a holiday period — be it May Day, the eve of St Patrick's Day, the Twelfth of July or Christmas — the area is afflicted by a strange visitation in which trees and, in some instances, houses suddenly

fall down? Has the Minister a role to play in the future prevention of that particular scourge?

Mr Ross: Of course, when such mysterious incidents happen, it is important that they are investigated. In East Antrim, there have been incidents of flooding recently and in 2007, when the flooding was, perhaps, more severe. Much of that has been blamed on inadequate drainage in new developments and the fact that, in many cases, buildings have been erected on flood plains. It is, therefore, important that the Minister ensures that building does not occur on flood plains and that developments have adequate drainage.

Indeed, the current slowing down of the property market allows the Department the space to define proposals and policies in time for the inevitable upturn in construction, so that, where it can be avoided, there is no excessive development in already built-up areas. I understand that the Department is already dealing with many of the issues to which the motion refers. I support the Minister's work in that regard. Perhaps he will indicate whether he will re-examine PPS 7: Quality Residential Environments, to determine what additions could be made to deal with the increasing number of flat conversions and apartments.

Furthermore, it is important to consider reducing the coverage of hard surfacing, which has become a feature of many new developments. That would ensure that greater volumes of rainwater are retained on sites, thereby reducing the surge of water that runs into rivers and can cause flooding, particularly in more vulnerable areas of Northern Ireland.

I support the motion and look forward to hearing the Minister's response to the debate.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin.

I thank the Members who brought the motion before the House. I welcome the opportunity to speak on it.

In October 2007, "garden grabbing"—the practice of replacing homes and gardens with high-occupancy townhouses and apartment blocks—was debated in the Chamber. Thankfully, the previous Environment Minister was committed to deal with the issue to ensure that back gardens are not categorised as brownfield sites. The exercise of cramming new housing developments into residential areas is not a suitable way to alleviate housing pressures. It takes away from local character, as well as from the environmental and social quality of life of residents and communities. Sinn Féin called for those practices to be monitored to ensure that suitable housing should be properly designed and kept in context with the local area and surroundings. Current planning policy should be amended to protect explicitly the character of existing residential areas, which have recently been under threat from inappropriate densities of new residential development.

Sinn Féin would welcome a review of policies in relation to PPS12. I understand that guidance was issued by the previous Environment Minister. At the end of that process, a policy is needed that advocates a sustainable approach to housing through increased density and use of brownfield sites. That must be balanced with the need to protect the character of existing residential areas.

In the current economic climate, social and affordable housing should be promoted through policy. Under the Semple Report's proposals and recommendations, the Housing Executive should be more proactive in vesting land for social housing. In disposal of land to the private sector, the Housing Executive should, in appropriate circumstances, seek to ensure that significantly more than 20% of the development is provided for social and affordable housing.

Social and affordable housing should form the building blocks of renewed communities. Research has shown that mixed-income and mixed-tenure communities have been a success. Residents consider their neighbours to be ordinary people like themselves. Young families are attracted to such areas. Problems that are often associated with low-income areas do not occur.

3.00 pm

Any policy should be inclusive. The provision of public open space, governed by PPS 8, is also an important element of any scheme and must be incorporated in such a way as to enhance the overall living conditions of residents. In the recent past, developers have tried to cram in as many houses as they can; where they are required to provide open space, it is normally at the bottom of the site or out of the road, whereas it should be suitably positioned to enhance developments.

Sinn Féin supports the motion. Planning policy should be reviewed and amended to ensure that all future residential development respects the character and the amenity of existing areas and contributes to environmental quality. Future developments must be sustainable in many ways; they must be accessible to existing infrastructure and facilities; and they must provide good quality living accommodation across a mix of tenures in a way that encourages successful and vibrant communities. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome the fact that we are debating planning and development in residential areas, and I congratulate the proposers of the motion for raising the issue in the Assembly.

New developments can cause real trauma to homeowners when new planning proposals are issued for their neighbourhoods which can adversely affect their homes and lives. Even planning applications for areas further afield, which are seen as threatening to

the neighbourhood, can cause upset and motivate people to oppose new proposals.

However, I wish the proposers of the motion had been more specific and less woolly. The wording of the motion is very general; in order to change the planning system, we need to get down to specifics. I hope that the Alliance Party is not more interested in headline-grabbing and leading a debate in the Assembly than in bringing about real change — such as that achieved on the garden grabbing issue, where the Minister has removed mention of gardens from the definition of “brownfield site”. There, a change was achieved.

The motion contains a strange mix of components. The first part of it concerns the protection of residential character; the second, the creation of mixed and balanced communities. I view those as different aspects of the planning system.

Change to residential character is ongoing, as older homes with real character and larger plots are replaced by multiple dwellings or blocks of apartments. Insufficient emphasis has been placed on the importance of preserving residential character. It would have been helpful had the proposers of the motion come forward with specific proposals as to how PPS 7 or PPS 12 should be changed. That would effect change in the planning system and affect how planning officers go about their duties.

I welcome the circular issued by the Planning Service's director of operations, Anne Garvey, to all planning officers in August 2007, which highlighted the references to protection of residential character in PPSs and reminded all staff to take particular care when determining the outcome of planning applications in residential areas.

Like other Members, I have noticed some movement in the balance of the decision-making process in the Planning Service. More frequently, one sees terminology such as:

“the proposal is contrary to policy QD1 of the planning policy statement on quality residential environments.”

That has to be welcomed. I hope that the Minister will undertake to continue to ensure that planning officers give serious weight to aspects of the planning system that give protection to the character of residential properties.

The planning system is complicated. The regional development strategy is at the highest level, and beneath it are area plans, areas of townscape character, conservation areas, listed-building protection and PPS 7 and PPS 12, which largely govern this issue.

Everyone will agree that there is room for further improvement. I hope that those matters will be reviewed to afford greater protection. Unfortunately, reviews of planning policy such as PPS 5, which was debated yesterday, seem, on occasion, to take an eternity. I hope that such a lengthy process will not be repeated.

Finally, in PPS 12, the reference to mixed or balanced residential communities has a number of meanings, including the regional spread of homes, mixed tenure and the encouragement of the development of balanced local communities. However, it is not clear at which interpretation the motion is steered. Ultimately, it is people who create communities. I look forward to learning about specific proposals for effecting change in the planning system from the proposers of the motion.

Mrs Hanna: I support the motion, and I thank the Members who tabled it.

As is the case with many Members, planning issues comprise a considerable amount of my constituency work. I appreciate Mr Beggs's remarks. It is hard to be too specific when speaking about a broad area, especially as planning issues can vary considerably, particularly between rural and urban areas.

I represent South Belfast, which is a diverse and vibrant constituency. It encompasses: the leafy suburbs of the Malone Road; the excesses of commercialism and its associated problems on the Golden Mile; the new and expanding housing developments in Castlereagh; and the terraced housing of the Village area, off the Lisburn Road.

Certainly, it is perceived to be, and is in parts, a leafy, affluent suburb, but it also comprises two of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland, resulting in a huge demand for diverse and, indeed, affordable housing.

Aggressive development activity and too many multiple occupancy houses threaten the already fragile balance between residential and commercial development. South Belfast has a good architectural heritage of sound Victorian and Edwardian buildings. Some of those substantial and attractive buildings are being demolished at a rate of knots, which detracts from the attractiveness of the area.

I was not brought up in leafy suburbs of South Belfast, but it is an attractive area that must be maintained and balanced. Often those large, attractive buildings are seen to be less valuable than the sites on which they are located. Certainly, it has become too expensive for many families to live in South Belfast. That will result in a distorted age profile for the population of the area. Communities will not be viable unless we examine those problems. More imagination creates more diverse housing developments.

When I was a councillor for Balmoral, I found it frustrating that we had only a consultative role in the planning process and that we had no decision-making powers. Local residents and representatives unanimously opposed a development, but it was difficult to effect any change. I appreciate that the planners listened politely. A bit of change is coming and more people are listening, but there is certainly a way to go. Decisions can have a huge impact on a big area; they can change

its character and affect the viability of its communities, which is the most important issue. If people leave, it becomes a no-go area. Areas lose balance and mix through over-aggressive and intensified development. Planning policies appear to be weighted in favour of development rather than the protection of the environment. In years gone by, perhaps that was the policy, because there was little development, but that must change. Major developments must be postponed until we have a better and more integrated transport system.

It was good to see the introduction of the SmartPass for the over-60s — I have just received mine through the post and I am delighted with it.

Some Members: You are not old enough.

Mrs Hanna: I wish I were not. The bus service has certainly improved, but it is too expensive for people who do not have cars and are dependent on it — that must also be examined.

The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) has made some controversial decisions. The commission is not democratically accountable, and planners are often afraid to make recommendations in case they are overturned by the PAC — incurring expensive legal costs. I appreciate that that issue has to be weighed.

Of course, the increase in single-person households is affecting the social mix. Apartments are needed, but the issue is about being more imaginative about where they are located in relation to main arterial routes. It is the case that some older people in residential areas like to downsize: and it would be lovely to replace a home with four apartments, but what is happening is that apartments are being crammed together to make more money, which is spoiling the idea.

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

Mrs Hanna: In closing, planners should focus on smaller areas when drawing up plans. It is important to keep communities viable and together.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Wells, with or without his SmartPass.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker; it is a disgrace that the honourable Member for South Belfast has had to lie about her age by adding a decade to it in order to get her bus pass. I am sure that there is no way that she could be anywhere near the age for getting a bus pass.

Mrs Hanna: Thank you.

Mr Wells: Planning in residential areas is a burning issue in my constituency of South Down. There are 17 applications for controversial, high-density, apartments in Newcastle that are awaiting approval, and local residents are opposed to every one of them. Phrases such as “garden grabbing”, overdevelopment, and apartment blitz are everywhere.

Members will be aware of the disgraceful incident that took place at Myrtle Lodge in Newcastle in March this year when a developer ripped out trees in order to create space for a forthcoming apartment development. An unacceptable change of character has been seen in many of our historic communities. I have seen incidences where a developer has knocked down one house in a long row of detached houses in a leafy suburb and submitted an application to build 20 or 24 apartments. That would result in a complete and utter change of the character of the area.

One of the benefits of the Assembly is that the previous Minister of the Environment Mrs Foster listened to the concerns that had been expressed in a previous debate.

Mr McCarthy: Hear, hear.

Mr Wells: Mrs Foster rushed out a circular — PC03/07 — which has led to considerable changes in my constituency. Applications that would have been approved on the nod have been turned down as a result of that circular. That is good news: that is progress. Well done to the honourable Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone; but — and it is a big “but” — that circular has not been tested at PAC. Inevitably, some applications that have rightly been turned down as a result of the circular will go before the Planning Appeals Commission, which will result in a multi-millionaire developer and a group of residents appealing to an under-resourced planning service — it will be a very unequal battle. Considering the resources that the large developers have, some appeals will inevitably be successful. That will drive down the quality of decision-making, because the Planning Service will not see the point in turning down applications if they are going to lose on appeal. A precedent will be set.

First, it is vital that we have not only the circular, but a change in policy. PPS 7 must be upgraded to take account of our changed circumstances. I hope that the Minister will provide some indication as to when that will happen because it is a big problem for communities in South Down and particularly those in the east of the Province. Some of my colleagues from west of the Bann ask what apartments, garden grabbing and overdevelopment are because they do not seem to have those problems. In County Down, south-east Belfast and Antrim, however, they are big problems. The policy must be enshrined so that the residents have a strong document with which they can fight the developers.

Secondly, another change was made. It is unfair to say that the Minister of the Environment removed gardens from the concept of brownfield development — it was actually the Department for Regional Development through its review of the regional development strategy. As a result of that review, gardens are no longer defined as brownfield sites.

3.15 pm

That is important because the regional development strategy has set a target that 60% of housing in urban areas should be on what are called brownfield development sites. When I was first elected and that regional strategy was going through, I, and many others, thought that that applied to warehouses, offices and industrial landscapes. In other words, if an old office block was knocked down, no one would complain if apartments were built on that site. There was a loophole, of course. The developers spotted that gardens also constituted previously developed land; that has left us in the position that we are in.

In June 2008, the Department did change its definition of "brownfield", but I have not seen a ha'p'orth of difference in the decisions that have been made since that happened. One of the things that the Committee for Regional Development is trying to tease out from the Department is what that new definition means in terms of change. There must be a presumption against the use of gardens as brownfield sites.

We are, hopefully, making progress; I think that there is unanimity in the Assembly. We cannot allow the heritage of large parts of our suburbs to go out the window and into the back of a lorry as builder's rubble or chopped-down trees. We have to take a stand: if the Assembly can deliver on this issue, Mr Wilson will find that that will be an extremely popular decision throughout Northern Ireland, including East Antrim.

Mr McKay: Thank you, go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The character of our towns and villages is worth protecting. If developers are building new homes within settlements, then those homes should be built to meet a minimum standard with regard to character, residential privacy and the existing infrastructure. I for one, and I am sure that there are others, have seen more than one example of developments going ahead without the local sewerage systems having the adequate capacity to deal with further additions to the network. That leads to serious problems, not only in that neighbourhood, but for the entire settlement. Communication problems between the different Departments that result in problems like that should be resolved constructively, rather than individual Departments passing the buck when things go wrong, as is so often the case.

A marker needs to be put down. Squeezing as many sites as possible into a backyard to make as much profit as possible is not the ethos that developers should be implementing at the heart of our communities. Instead, the Department of the Environment (DOE) should be ensuring that quality development and quality of life are the cornerstones of planning policy. In all that, community planning needs to be central.

Anna Lo raised the very important issue of the removal of trees. We are all aware of the problems around tree preservation orders (TPOs), and that legislation is something that needs strengthened. Very often, developers come in and remove large areas of trees without any support from the local community. Before decisions like that are made, there is a need for some sort of community consultation.

Last year, a former divisional planning manager for Belfast, Professor Bill Morrison, reflected on how planning has lost sight of the quality aspect of housing:

"It pays to ... do without gardens if you can get away with it, and get as many units as you possibly can on every site ... Compared with what went before, 21st century homes are like prison cells."

I think that we can all cite examples from our respective constituencies of the sort of housing that the professor was referring to.

A balance needs to be struck between the need to increase the use of brownfield sites and the need to protect the character of existing residential areas. Alternative housing proposals, such as the successful Living Over The Shop scheme, should be further encouraged to try to breath new life into urban areas. My colleague Cathal Boylan referred to the need for social and affordable housing to be at the forefront of new communities. Research shows that mixed-income communities are successful and that where they have been introduced, the expectations of developers, residents and housing managers have been met.

In closing, a LeasCheann Comhairle, we support the motion and seek a commitment from the Minister to protect those communities that are being threatened by garden grabbing and town cramming. The Minister must promote social and affordable housing through planning policy by ensuring that there is a minimum percentage of new housing development ringfenced for that particular sector. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Shannon: A'hm weill kent in mae constituency fer gien boadies a han' wi' issues adae wi' plennin. Monie times A hae writ screeds tae heft plennin' applications an in the same wie screeds agin applications. Bein' an elected representative wha wrochts haird fer es constituency oan the grun, A know aboot the gye baag need at thair bes fer affordable hoosin fer fowk. Hooiniver, a balance can an maun bae found quhar we're fit tae bigg oan lan' wi'oot destroyin' character an' thon bes wha this motion bes aa aboot.

I am well known in my constituency for helping people with planning issues, often writing letters of support for, and in opposition to, planning applications. Being an elected representative who works hard on the ground, I am also aware of the great need for affordable housing. However, a balance can, and must, be found whereby land can be developed without destroying

character, and that is what this motion is about. How many times have Members mentioned “balance”?

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of garden grabbing — developers squeezing as much as they can out of a small space. That approach can work only if there is respect for the surrounding area and for the people who live nearby.

In my own area there have been established developments with large houses and large gardens. Someone then comes along and buys two houses and decides to build 40 flats. There are other planning applications — on the Manse Road and the Mountain Road in Newtownards, where there has been established housing for over 40 years — for someone to buy two houses in order to build 10 flats or four semi-detached houses in their place, which changes the whole character of the area.

There is a long waiting list for housing in Newtownards. In principle, therefore, I am in favour of as much social housing as it is feasible to build. The key issue for this motion, however, is what is feasible.

There are homes in my constituency with an acre and a half of land behind them and they are close to busy roads on which the infrastructure is already strained. Is it feasible to build more homes on such land? If more homes were to be built, the roads and sewerage systems would have to be overhauled just to try to cram in those developments. There are also prime lots of ground where there are no outstanding problems with enough land to build what are known as quad houses, which can provide homes for 16 families without adversely affecting an area. It is a question of balance and how one retains the character of an area while at the same time trying to address the issue of housing, particularly social housing.

As with any progress, it is important to bring everybody of all ages alongside. Development is no different, and it is important that a gothic mansion is not built beside an ultra-modern skyscraper apartment block — extremes of building that would destroy an area's character forever. Furthermore, as much as apartment blocks seem to be the best way to get a return on money — and that is why they are built — they are not always what is needed, and that must be considered by the Planning Service.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member has spoken of the need for social housing, and we all agree with him on that point. In my experience, however, none of the apartments built as a result of garden grabbing provide an extra single unit of social housing. It is simply greed, not need. Those flats are sold for £200,000 to £300,000 and none of my constituents in need of social housing could afford them.

Mr Shannon: I was just about to say that when apartments are built for elderly people, they are

unsuitable. Lifts may be installed because the elderly people cannot use the stairs; however, at the end of the day, those elderly residents know that that type of apartment block is unsuitable.

The Member is correct — I am not aware of any developments in my constituency that have been specifically for social housing. They have all been in order to fill the pockets of developers.

Surely it makes more sense to build a terrace bungalow in order to help the elderly, and to build a family home in order to meet the needs of a family. If one looks at an estate agent's leaflet in order to see how many apartments are being bought or leased, they will see that such properties are lying vacant because there is no demand for them.

PPS 7 and PPS 12 are the two key issues that the Minister must address when he responds to the motion. A review of PPS 12 is under way, and perhaps now is the perfect time for the Assembly to present its views on the subject.

Much could be said about the motion, but its main ideal is that more social housing should be built in the correct manner. I await with anticipation my honourable colleague the Minister of the Environment's paper on planning. The Minister, well known in the past as “Red Sam” is now known as “Green Sam”, although some say that he is “Not-So-Green Sam”. I refer to Sammy Wilson, who will, as the Minister responsible, respond to Members.

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

Mr Shannon: I thank the Members for their contributions to the debate, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Armstrong: I, in common with most people, support the retention of the character of residential areas. One of the most concerning aspects of the development boom in Northern Ireland over the past decade has been the seeming inability of the Planning Service to police the planning system properly in order to protect the public from what can only be described as rash, inappropriate development.

Throughout the country, Members have witnessed single dwellings being demolished and replaced by multiple houses or apartment developments that are all too often totally out of character with neighbouring buildings and amount to little more than blights on the landscape. Members have highlighted numerous examples of those developments in areas such as north Down, particularly in Holywood, and on the north coast, particularly in Portrush and Portstewart. However, such developments also exist in mid-Ulster towns such as Cookstown, Dungannon and Magherafelt.

Large lawns of residential houses have been removed to accommodate high-rise flats that are totally out of character with the area. The problem is not the lack of legislation governing such development but the lack of enforcement of the relevant planning policy statements. I have no doubt that the Minister's officials and the Planning Service will assure him that all is well, but the evidence on the ground tells a different story. The Assembly must be prepared to help those communities that propose local initiatives to create a shared future and to grow organically. However, that cannot be imposed on them.

Mr K Robinson: I have heard several comments about a shared future. Will the Member clarify whether he is talking about two communities living together and sharing a space or about people with wealth and position in society sharing a space with those who seek such wealth and position?

Mr Armstrong: I agree with the Member's comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Has the Member finished?

Mr Armstrong: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

The Minister of the Environment (Mr S Wilson): It was terrible to see one of Mr Armstrong's colleagues finish him off like that.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion. I will not be as churlish as Mr Beggs, who suggested that the motion was concerned only with headline grabbing. I am sure that it is no more about headline grabbing than the motion about PPS 5 and shopping centres that was debated in the House yesterday.

The debate presents an important opportunity to air views on an issue that, as reflected by the contributions of many Members, causes widespread concern. It is not only an issue in Belfast, and Members mentioned that Cookstown, provincial towns and even some smaller rural villages have been affected.

I was a bit disappointed that the speech by the proposer of the motion, Ms Lo, did not give sufficient weight to the steps taken by the Planning Service and the former Minister. I am glad that other Members, of the Alliance Party and other parties, acknowledged that the steps that Arlene Foster took as Minister helped to improve the situation.

Mr McCarthy: In defence of my colleague, the rest of the Alliance Party MLAs are, for our sins, local councillors, but Anna is not. Therefore, as I am sure the Minister will accept, she does not have the same experience of changes that have taken place.

3.30 pm

The Minister of the Environment: It is fairly apparent to any public representative, especially one with an interest in planning, that changes have taken place and that a substantial number of applications that

may have gone through previously have now been turned down. Mr Wells's caveat is important; however, it remains to be seen how the Planning Appeals Commission deals with that issue. I will come later to the point that he made earlier about the need to change policy.

The circular that was sent out made it clear that the former Minister had concerns, and it pointed to the policies that were in place and to how she believed that they should be interpreted. It went on to give examples of appeals that the Planning Appeals Commission had dismissed, and it listed the reasons that were given. It suggested that planning officers could use those decisions as templates when considering particular planning applications. The Minister's robust attention helped to guide planning officers and to clarify the situation for them.

Ms Lo also raised the issue of houses in multiple occupation, which is a particularly important issue in South Belfast. She will know that as part of the re-examination of PPS 7, that issue will be considered again. However, that is not only a planning issue; it is a multi-faceted issue that cannot be tackled by one Department. It needs a multi-agency approach, and I am glad to say that an inter-agency group has been set up in Belfast City Council under the chairmanship of the chief executive. It is the primary role of the Planning Service to prepare and publish an HMO subject plan for Belfast, which should be available later this year. Other agencies will also be involved in that.

The issue is about mixed development. Ms Lo mentioned it, and I notice that other Members picked up on it. She gave the interesting example of the changes that have taken place at Piney Hills. Those illustrate the difficult planning decisions that have to be made on, for example, apartment developments in areas where there are large houses with gardens. I have experienced such decisions in my involvement with Belfast City Council.

Nearly all the apartment developments at Piney Hills have been of 1,500 sq ft and 2,000 sq ft, and they have been aimed specifically at people who have lived in large houses and brought up their families in the area. Their houses are now too big for them, but they wish to stay in the community in which they live. In discussing mixed developments, planners must consider such issues. It illustrates the point that other Members have made: not all apartment development is inappropriate. Consideration must be given to how a balanced approach can best be achieved to deal with such issues.

As has been pointed out, the definition of gardens as brownfield sites is not an issue for the Department of the Environment; it is a matter for the Department for Regional Development. Indeed, the former Minister addressed that point. As Mr Wells pointed out, the impact

that that will have on planning decisions is yet to be determined, but at least the request that was made for the Minister to address that problem has been acceded to.

Mr K Robinson: The point that folk who have lived in Piney Hills for a long time wish to remain in the area was well made by the Minister. Will he also note that many people who have lived in social-housing areas for many years and whose families have grown up find that the accommodation is no longer suitable for them? The Planning Service could help by re-zoning greenfield land in those housing estates so that proper housing that is suitable for older residents could be provided for those who wish to remain in those areas.

The Minister of the Environment: The Member makes an important point. Recently, on the edge of his constituency, a redundant school was made available for housing. That housing will be built with the specific aims of accommodating families who have lived in the area for a long time and of allowing young people to stay there. The re-zoning of land — in all areas — must be considered in that context.

Mr Ross, my colleague from East Antrim, raised the issue of flooding, which can occur for two reasons. First, some floods result from rivers that overflow onto flood plains and, subsequently, impact on developments that are situated there. PPS 15, a precautionary approach and the strategic flooding maps that will be introduced should address that matter. However, measures must be applied carefully, and we must not become overcautious and restrict development in massive areas of Northern Ireland. We should consider whether mitigation steps can be taken, rather than wipe out development in large areas.

The other type of flooding arises from an area's infrastructure. I have considered PPS 7, spoken to officials about that matter, and have witnessed some good practice on the part of developers in Northern Ireland. I hope that when changes to PPS 7 are agreed, they will include views on how to address such flooding.

Recently, I visited a housing development in Lisburn that spans scores of acres where, as a result of measures such as the treatment of driveways, planting of hedges around houses, collection of run-off water from the site, providing water barrels for every household, and so on, the run-off will be no more than if the area had been left as agricultural land. That is possible, if developers put their minds to it. However, if developers do not introduce such measures, we must formulate policies that compel them to do so. Not all developers have adopted the same attitude as the developer in Lisburn.

The Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Boylan mentioned social housing. The Department will examine PPS 12 and the provision of social housing. However, one must accept that it is not a simple case — especially in the current economic climate — of

forcing a developer to make a certain percentage of houses available for social housing. We must accept that many developers bought land when it was expensive and, since then, there has been a downturn in the market. As Members have said repeatedly, we must keep the building industry buoyant at a time when many people are being laid off in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, we must ensure that our chosen policy does not slow up the planning process.

We must avoid a situation in which legal requirements in respect of tying down developer contributions add years to the development process. That can happen with article 40 agreements. We cannot wave a magic wand and produce social housing — economic, planning and legal factors must be considered.

Mr Boylan also mentioned the importance of zoning land, which will, under local development plans, soon become the responsibility of local councils.

I will quickly address the comments that were made by Mr Beggs, who pleaded with the proposers of the motion to be specific about what changes should be made to PPS 7 and PPS 12. I would have loved to hear what specific proposals Mr Beggs had for changing those documents, rather than simply asking questions; or what he understood “mixed and balanced” communities to mean, rather than simply asking the proposers what they meant. In a debate, the views of the Members who take part are considered, as well as the views of the proposers of the motion.

I turn to the comments of the birthday girl, the Member for South Belfast Carmel Hanna. She does not look a day over 50, despite getting her bus pass — as Mr Wells pointed out. As Minister of the Environment, I hope that she will use her bus pass to come to Parliament Buildings, thus reducing her carbon footprint, because Members know how concerned I am about that issue. *[Laughter.]*

The Member made an important point about people downsizing and wanting to live in communities. She also mentioned that it was appropriate for developments to be located on arterial routes. Taller buildings could define arterial routes, so those are appropriate places to build smaller, single-person apartments. That is something that planning officers should consider.

I turn to the comments of my colleague Mr Wells, who made history this week. Yesterday, the green wing of the party congratulated this Minister of the Environment and, today, he congratulated the previous Minister of the Environment. That is something. However, he also gave a qualified signal of approval to the Sinn Féin Minister for Regional Development on the issue of the definition of gardens. That last point is even more historic than the first — although perhaps that should be the other way around; I do not know.

He made a number of points that I will address —

Lord Morrow: Perhaps he is turning green.

The Minister of the Environment: Perhaps he is. The point that he made about the Planning Appeals Commission is very important. I hope that it gets the message that there has been a change in policy. Mr Wells is quite right that there is an obligation on the Department to make sure that the policy is in place and enforced. For that reason, I hope to quickly introduce addenda to PPS 7 so that the criteria against which those applications are judged are quite explicit. The second point that Mr Wells made, as did other Members, concerned the ripping up of trees. The penalties for that must be beefed up.

I do not have time to comment on what other Members said —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister must draw his remarks to a close.

The Minister of the Environment: I trust that other Members do not feel miffed that I did not have a chance to respond to their points, but many of those points have much in common with issues that I have already addressed.

Mr B Wilson: During the debate, a number of Members referred to failures in the planning process. As far as North Down is concerned, the planning policies that were designed to protect our built environment have totally failed. For almost 30 years, I have sat in the North Down Borough Council chamber, listening to planners approving applications that were totally against the wishes of the council and the local people. In many cases, there were acts of environmental vandalism.

Something should be done to introduce some democracy into the planning system. I am sorry that no one else raised that issue. Other countries make every effort to preserve and restore their built heritage, but we seem determined to eliminate it. As a result, over the years, we in North Down have seen our leafy suburbs destroyed and turned into concrete jungles. Picturesque villages have become dominated by apartments, and mature trees have been felled to enable yet another row of town houses to be crammed in. The destruction has accelerated in recent years, as speculators explore new ways to cram more houses into smaller spaces.

That is highlighted by the garden-grabbing epidemic, which most Members mentioned, and which is particularly prevalent in urban areas of Bangor and Holywood.

3.45 pm

Garden grabbing is endemic in North Down. For example, last year, speculators delivered leaflets in Bangor that asked whether householders were willing to sell their properties. That practice has destabilised some well-established communities, as each resident wonders whether his or her next-door neighbour will

sell out, leaving him or her to face the prospect of apartments being built in the next garden.

In one particularly disturbing case, an elderly widow who did not wish to sell her house, in which she had brought up her family and had lived for more than 40 years, was pressurised to sell by her neighbours, because they would not get their money unless the entire row of six houses was sold.

In another case, a householder refused to sell, so the developer bought the houses on each side. My constituent's property is now surrounded on three sides by a fourteen-unit apartment block, which denies that person any sense of privacy.

I shall now deal with points raised by Members. Alastair Ross mentioned the problem of flooding. A couple of weeks ago, on a Saturday evening, I was called out three times because houses were being flooded. They were flooded because water was not able to drain away due to the lack of open, green space. Water ran down the road and into gardens as a result of overdevelopment and the loss of green space.

Cathal Boylan mentioned PPS 8, which I find interesting, as it deals with the sale of council land. Some councils have sold off small parcels of land, particularly in towns and villages, resulting in a loss of local amenities. Ards Borough Council has been particularly good at getting rid of small pieces of public open space.

Mr McCarthy: I am a member of Ards Borough Council, and the Member is right to say that the council tried to sell several pieces of land. None of the nine plots that it attempted to sell have been sold so far, for whatever reasons.

I am particularly concerned about coastal land, which has not been mentioned, so I will use this opportunity to appeal to the Minister to say no to the destruction of our coastline. It is disappearing fast, and I have been leading the charge against Ards Borough Council's attempts to sell coastal land.

Mr B Wilson: Jim Wells, with whom I often agree, mentioned tree preservation orders (TPOs), which are a matter of great concern to me. Trees add character to an area, and their demolition totally transforms that character. I am concerned by the fact that developers ignore TPOs. Jim Wells mentioned the case of Myrtle Lodge, Newcastle, and there has been another instance in Shandon Park, Belfast. In each case, the developer knew that there was a TPO, but was willing to accept whatever fine the court imposed.

Over the years, the courts' record has been pretty miserable. I recall the case of the City of Derry Golf Club, which was fined £200 for cutting down a tree that was subject to a TPO. What does such a fine mean to a developer who will make millions? Such a sum

means absolutely nothing. Consequently, developers cut down trees and face the courts, knowing that their actions will have little impact.

I want the Minister to ensure that developers who deliberately ignore tree preservation orders face the full rigour of the law. They should be forced to replant trees in the same area.

Mr Wells: A policy that prevents developers from ever gaining from their vandalism would be more of a deterrent. In other words, future apartment development on the area that those trees covered should be banned.

Moreover, I understand why the Member is concerned, but has he not noticed some changes since the introduction of planning circular 03/07? The tide has turned since that was introduced. We must encourage the Department to ensure that the tide flows against such vandalism for ever.

Mr B Wilson: The tide may have turned, but it has not yet reached North Down. In June, planning permission was given to replace two Victorian detached dwellings with 24 new apartments. That again relates to the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) 2015, and it reflects a trend in that part of Bangor.

North Down Borough Council has fought for years to have that part of Bangor declared an area of townscape character. That is now included in the draft BMAP. The problem is that the draft BMAP has not yet been adopted. Therefore, developers are knocking down houses before it is implemented. If we do not ensure that the draft BMAP is adopted soon, there will be nothing left in that area to protect. The BMAP issues paper was published in 2001, and we are still waiting for its approval. Expediting that process would certainly help North Down, and it would clarify many issues in other parts of greater Belfast.

The Minister's decision to amend PPS 7 is welcome and extremely useful. There is a lack of clarity at present, and I am concerned by the number of applications that the Planning Appeals Commission has overturned. Planners sometimes question the point of turning down applications that the PAC subsequently approves. The PAC must be told exactly —

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to review, and where necessary to amend, planning policies to protect the character of residential areas and to create mixed and balanced residential communities.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

20 mph Speed Limit Near Schools

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

Mr Molloy: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to consider introducing a 20 mph restricted speed limit as part of a broader package of traffic calming measures in the vicinity of schools.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The motion calls on the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Conor Murphy, to consider, along with other measures, a 20 mph speed limit near schools. In particular, that limit should be applied near rural schools, around some of which there is currently a 60 mph speed limit.

If one considers the isolation of some rural schools, the build-up of traffic around them and the number of children crossing roads and going to and from vehicles, a very dangerous situation exists. We want to reduce that risk to children, and that is why the proposal to have a 20 mph speed limit is important, particularly in rural areas.

Road signs can take various forms. One option is the fixed sign, but we know that, over the years, all of us have become complacent about the school sign that is displayed before every school — many of them have been in place for years, have not changed in design and no longer have an effect on motorists.

The job of the Assembly is to change or introduce new legislation to create a safer situation for children around their schools. Therefore, it is important that we introduce measures to change people's ideas about the signage around schools.

A pedestrian who is hit by a vehicle travelling at 20 mph has a one in 40 chance of being killed or a 97% chance of survival — that is a 17% greater chance of survival than if the vehicle were travelling at 30 mph. Therefore, the change would be important, and that is only in relation to the 30 mph speed limit that exists in urban areas — in general, the speed limit in a rural area is 60 mph and so a person's — particularly a child's — chance of survival will be little or none.

We must increase a pedestrian's chance of survival and make motorists more alert when approaching a school. A school is not just a building; it is a place where children as young as four — who may not have

much experience of road use — are crossing the road, and motorists must take that into account when they are passing a rural school. We are focusing mainly on primary schools, but that also applies to secondary schools.

A 20 mph speed limit could become an important signal for people in that situation. Various forms of signage can be used, but the main aim is to make motorists alert when approaching schools. Vehicle-activated signs could be introduced, along the lines of what is being used in pilot schemes in various locations, where there is a 60 mph sign that lights up when a vehicle is exceeding that speed or when a vehicle is approaching a hazard or road works, for example. Those pilot schemes have shown that changing signage is very effective, as it is not something that is there all the time, but is rather something that lights up and attracts a motorist's attention.

We accept John Dallat's amendment, suggesting a general speed limit of 20 mph in areas where many elderly and young people cross the road. However, we must not lose the focus on schools in the motion, because the main issue is the number of children at risk in the vicinity of schools and the importance of changing motorists' attitudes towards school crossings and school vicinities. Therefore, although we accept the amendment, we believe that there is a need to have a variation between the signage that is used at a school and that used in a housing estate or in an area where many elderly or young people cross the road.

Some may argue that a 20 mph speed limit is needed only at certain times of the day, particularly during the school day. However, if one considers the curriculum, as well as facilities that are now available, such as after-school and breakfast clubs, it is clear that the school day is now quite long. There are also after-school meetings with parents and other meetings happening in schools, so it is important that signage highlighting a 20 mph speed limit be still in place, because it is important to remember that, in rural areas, that involves a reduction from a 60 mph to a 20 mph speed limit.

The signage that we are talking about can be switched on or off and lights up when a vehicle is travelling too fast. Although the normal school working day may be over, there may still be children and vehicles, or other dangers, in the vicinity.

4.00 pm

My first and saddest experience of a school accident happened when my best friend, who was staying late at school for extra work in preparation for the 11-plus, was killed coming out of the school at 4.30 pm. The driver of the vehicle did not expect a 10-year-old child to be cycling out of the school at that time of the evening. At that young age, I learned of the importance of signage outside school hours.

Over the years, a lot of the signage has become overgrown and occluded in different ways. Therefore,

something different from what we had in the past is required. The old school sign that has been on display for years may have been sufficient when people were travelling on bicycles or horses and carts, but times have changed dramatically since then. The signage must be upgraded. Vehicle-activated signs can provide the flexibility that is required when dealing with a new situation.

I decided to table the motion following the school bus tragedy in Ballygawley, in which a young girl was killed. That was a different situation in that it was not a speed-related accident, but the issue is the protection of children.

Parents send their children out to school in the morning. They put them on the bus and hand them into the protection of someone else. Parents expect their children to return home safely, and they expect that they will be safe during the school day. Furthermore, they expect us — the people who make the legislation — to ensure that the safety of their children is protected. It is important that the Assembly respond to the needs of the community. If extra signage is required, we must find different ways of providing it. I am certain that the driver travelling behind the school bus in the Ballygawley incident would have been aware that the bus had come to a standstill if there had been flashing lights on the back of the bus.

Every day on the motorways, we see a large vehicle — or sometimes two or three — with large flashing lights alerting motorists that there are roadworks, and, therefore, dangers ahead. If it is possible to provide flashing lights on slow vehicles to alert drivers of the presence of workmen ahead, it should be possible to provide a similar facility at schools.

It is important to look at ways of creating protection for children who are going to school. We must ensure that parents are instilled with the confidence that their children will return home from school safely and that they are not in danger.

The school location is important, and it is imperative that children get out of vehicles or cross roads securely. As Members know, many rural schools are in secluded areas and surrounded by trees and hedges. Vehicle drivers and strangers in the vicinity may not know that there is a school in the area, because the signage has become covered by a hedge, for instance.

It is important to reduce the speed limit, but it is also important to draw the driver's attention to the fact that there is a school in a particular location. The restriction of speed limits to 20 mph, and the associated provision of signs, might be only one part of the solution. There might also be a need for ramps, cameras and other devices to capture the attention of drivers and to police the area. It is important that the areas in which schools are located are policed to ensure that drivers

respond to the signage, but the first stage is the provision of modern signage that responds to vehicle speed and informs drivers that there is a school in that location. It should inform drivers of the danger in that location. We must ensure that the protection of our children is paramount by drawing up legislation.

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert:

“and neighbourhoods where the risk of speeding traffic constitutes a particular danger to pedestrians, especially children and older people.”

I welcome the motion, and I thank Francie and Michelle for tabling it. So far this year, 75 people have lost their lives on the roads. Last year, 112 people were killed on our roads — that is more than two people killed every week — and more than 6,000 were injured, 813 of whom were children. If that number of people had been injured or killed as a result of the past conflict, there would be roadblocks and an outcry; it would be international news.

I am grateful that the Minister for Regional Development is in the Chamber. The SDLP is demanding that he, in conjunction with other Ministers, take urgent action on road accidents.

The motion should have gone further, and that is why the SDLP has proposed an amendment. The motion asks only that the Minister consider a measure that is already under consideration. Surely the time for consideration and studies is over? It is now time for action.

Furthermore, the original motion refers only to schools and not to other places where children are present, such as housing estates and residential areas. Why should we be allowed to speed in places meant for living and for play? Our housing estates and residential areas have become deserted because the car has taken precedence over people. That is wrong and should be changed.

In November 2007, I asked the Minister what impact on road safety a reduction of speed would have. He answered:

“A further TRL study found that, in a review of 250 traffic calming schemes across England, Scotland and Wales, average speeds fell by 9 mph, collisions fell by 60%, collisions involving children fell by 67% and collisions involving cyclists fell by 29%.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 25, p WA248, Col 1]*.

However, the Minister does not seem to be of a mind to introduce general, reduced speed limits in residential areas here. In May of this year, I asked him to reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 mph. His answer was:

“While my Department’s Roads Service encourages and supports 20mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road users, I have no plans to generally reduce speed limits in housing estates and other built up areas to 20 mph.” — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 30, p WA269, Col 2]*.

I ask the Minister why that is the case? Can any Member think of a single housing estate in his or her constituency

where the speed limit should be more than 20 mph? I will give way to any Member who feels that that is the case or who would like to specify such an estate.

In a debate on graduated driving licences, in April of this year, the SDLP advocated several measures, including: housing estates having speed limits of 20 miles per hour; greatly reduced speed limits — as Mr Molloy specifically mentioned — around schools, particularly at times when pupils are arriving and leaving school; the creation of better footpaths, away from busy roads, especially on school routes; and the introduction of much heavier penalties for speeding, particularly when people are significantly over the speed limit. There should be much heavier penalties for drink driving, because we all know the consequences of that. There should be a re-evaluation and reduction of speed limits across hundreds of our roads. Greater restrictions should be placed on the performance of cars that are sold to inexperienced drivers. That would include car companies being forced to stop marketing cars as though our roads were race tracks and to stop associating engine performance with virility.

Changing the various rules entails financial cost. The Minister and the Executive should weigh the financial cost against the cost of human life and health. In any case, the cost of changing speed-limit signs would be heavily outweighed by the savings in lifelong health care, rehabilitation and disability benefits that follow many road traffic accidents.

Of course, all such cross-cutting decisions would require Executive meetings. While the blocking of those meetings remains, people remain unnecessarily at risk, because decisions are not being made.

The SDLP urges the relevant Ministers to cut through bureaucracy. It also urges the Executive to engage with partners and Governments in the Republic of Ireland and Britain, to do whatever must be done to introduce those measures urgently. That co-operation would require North/South meetings, which require Executive consent. However, as we know, the Executive are not meeting.

The SDLP wants the Executive to set up the necessary cross-cutting structures to research and implement a raft of road safety measures in the North and across this island. Furthermore, the SDLP not only wants speed restrictions imposed immediately outside schools, we want greater speed restrictions in other areas as well. Moreover, we want a raft of measures in the North as well as North/South and east-west measures — all of which require Executive meetings. We call on Sinn Féin — the party that sponsored the motion under debate — to allow the Executive to get on with the business of governance with immediate effect.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development (Mr Wells): Before I put on

my Committee hat, a scurrilous accusation was made against me in the previous debate claiming that I had congratulated the Minister for Regional Development. I make it absolutely clear that I would never — in any circumstances — congratulate the Minister for Regional Development. I simply noted that the Department for Regional Development had introduced the new definition of brownfield land. It is important that my whole political career does not go down the plughole because of one individual's slip of the tongue.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important motion. It is well known in the House that Northern Ireland has a poor safety record in comparison with the rest of the United Kingdom, and some of the stats are quite frightening. Speed is responsible for the greatest number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads. Indeed, research conducted by the Northern Ireland Audit Office found that 78% of deaths or serious injuries on Northern Ireland's roads in 2005 were as a result of excessive speed.

The Department for Transport in GB highlights the gravity of that issue with a report that states that when a pedestrian is hit by a vehicle travelling at 40 mph, there is a nine in 10 chance of that pedestrian being killed; whereas if a pedestrian is hit by a vehicle travelling at 20 mph, there is a one in 40 chance of that pedestrian being killed. Those frightening figures speak for themselves.

Earlier this year, the Committee for Regional Development examined the issue of speed limits at schools as part of its consideration of the draft speed-management policy for Northern Ireland. As part of its scrutiny, the Committee considered the views of a range of stakeholders, including the Road Safety Council of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Minister of Education. It considered the issue of a 20 mph restricted speed limit and various other measures aimed at increasing the safety of pedestrians and other vulnerable road users. On behalf of the Committee, I thank those who contributed their views and provided valuable information which greatly assisted us in reaching a considered course of action on this serious issue.

In informing its views on speed management, the Committee for Regional Development was strongly in favour of the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit at schools — especially on rural roads where the national speed limit applies, or on high-speed locations.

More specifically, Committee members thought that the 20 mph limits appear to be highly effective when they are variable and time dependent. Research indicates that the operation of a 20 mph limit in the vicinity of schools should coincide with children arriving at, or leaving, the school premises. That means that children and parents walking or cycling to and from their school

are protected. When the roads are free from schoolchildren and other vulnerable users, for example, at weekends and during school holidays, the normal speed limits would apply.

Variable speed-limit pilot test schemes outside five schools in Scotland reported that speeds did reduce. The Scottish Twenty's Plenty initiative resulted in a reduction in average speeds at 60% of the trial sites, and a considerable drop in the number and severity of accidents.

Pilot schemes are now in place at Hezlett Primary School, which I understand is near Castlerock in east Londonderry — the two gentlemen to my left put me right on that — and Kilmoyle Primary School, which I understand is in north Antrim, but I do not have a clue where Kilmoyle is.

Mr Dallat: Ballybogy.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: Ballybogy is on the way to Portrush, so I know where I am now.

Those pilot schemes are due to be completed in 2010. The Committee supports fully those initiatives and will take a keen interest in their progress.

The Committee for Regional Development also supports the use of other engineering-based traffic-calming measures where necessary to forcibly reduce vehicle speeds in the vicinity of schools. As I drive round parts of Northern Ireland — slowly, of course — I have started to notice illuminated-screen speed detectors, which display the motorist's speed. In my case it is 29 mph, 28 mph, 27 mph, or whatever. Those detectors are effective, and there is a need for such technology as it develops.

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

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development: The evidence in favour of 20 mph speed limits in the vicinity of schools is strong. A 20 mph limit, combined with other traffic-calming measures and the involvement and support of schools, parents and communities will bring enormous road safety benefits to the whole community.

4.15 pm

Mr McCallister: I congratulate Mr Wells on his speeding record, and I am happy to nominate him for citizen of the year. I thank and congratulate the Members who tabled the motion. My party colleagues and I fully support the principle of the motion and the SDLP amendment, and we look forward to the Minister's response.

As has been said, Northern Ireland has a poor record on road safety. That is apparent in the vicinity of schools where, unfortunately, schoolchildren are killed or seriously

injured every year. Six pupils aged between four and 18 were killed between 2002 and 2006. Some 103 schoolchildren were seriously injured in that period, and a staggering 1,039 pupils were slightly injured while travelling to or from school. Almost two thirds of pupils killed or seriously injured on their way to or from school were on foot at the time of the accident. We all agree that any death or injury of a schoolchild in Northern Ireland is one too many.

As the Minister has referenced in the past, research carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory in England indicates that it is expected that each 1 mph reduction in average speed will reduce collision frequency by 5%. The statistics that have been related by several other Members provide a compelling argument for reducing the speed limit in the vicinity of schools to 20 mph. A reduction in speed limits — along with a broader package of traffic-calming measures — in the vicinity of schools should be seriously considered by the Minister. The Ulster Unionist Party acknowledges the Minister's announcement in May that Roads Service is — as Mr Wells mentioned — piloting two schemes in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Minister will update us on the progress of those schemes.

It should be taken into account that reduced speed limits in the vicinity of schools may be inappropriate for a large percentage of time — for example, at night and during holiday periods. Reduced speed limits unaccompanied by a broader and more permanent package of traffic-calming measures — such as speed humps or gateway features — may not be wholly successful. That is exemplified by reduced speed limits effectively having been ignored in certain places in the Republic of Ireland.

However, there are examples of successful initiatives. The city of Hull has more than 115 20 mph traffic-calming zones. It is estimated that over 200 deaths or serious injuries, and 1,000 other injuries, have been prevented since the first of those zones was implemented in Hull in the 1990s. The total number of crashes within the 20 mph zones has fallen by 56%. The number of crashes, deaths and serious injuries has been cut by 90%, and the number of child-pedestrian casualties is down by 74%.

Edinburgh has 38 variable 20 mph zones, and almost all schools in Edinburgh have 20 mph limits around their entrance and local area. Those schemes were introduced in Edinburgh in 2005, and the number of child-pedestrian casualties has fallen from 119 in 2004 to 83 in 2006. The introduction of such schemes and the implementation of the SDLP's amendment would represent sensible and welcome progression; my party and I fully support them.

The debate also concerns the sustainability and health of children in Northern Ireland. We must

encourage and facilitate more children to walk or cycle to school. That would reduce traffic congestion and, more importantly, improve those children's health. Parents are much more likely to encourage their children to walk or cycle to school if they have the peace of mind that their children can do so in relative safety.

With that in mind, the introduction of a restricted, 20 mph speed limit should be considered as part of a broader package. We support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Lunn: The Alliance Party also supports the motion and the amendment, although it supports the motion with a bit more enthusiasm. I was told off earlier for tabling a motion that was a bit woolly and vague, and the same could be said of the amendment. It includes the words:

“neighbourhoods where the risk of speeding traffic constitutes a particular danger to pedestrians”.

That covers most of Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, in the spirit of charity and kindness, the Alliance Party will support the amendment.

I do not want to repeat what has already been said, but I must say that the Scottish experience appears to have been a bit contradictory. There have been success stories: in 2001, North Lanarkshire Council introduced a 20 mph speed limit in nearly all its residential areas, and, at one time, it achieved an 18% reduction in pedestrian accidents, so its efforts were obviously well worthwhile. However, that initiative was introduced in conjunction with other initiatives, so the reduction was not simply down to a 20 mph speed limit.

Angus Council found it extremely difficult to enforce a 20 mph speed limit. It said that success was dependent on local residents, but it found that once the residents realised that the speed limit was not enforceable, the effect wore off, and nobody paid any attention to it. The council decided not to introduce any more 20 mph speed limits and to review all existing schemes. Scotland's Finance and Sustainable Growth Department, which has responsibility for transport functions, has stated that the most effective way in which to reduce vehicle speeds to 20 mph or less is through engineering measures, which, I presume, means speed bumps. It seems that the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit is not an effective way in which to control traffic, unless it is accompanied by other traffic-calming measures. A 20 mph speed limit slows most vehicles down by only 1 mph — and that figure comes from the Scottish Minister for Transport.

The most effective way in which to ensure compliance with speed limits is enforcement. This country's attitude to speeding and speeding fines has always been a wee bit ambivalent. In fact, we had a laugh about that today. The authorities also condone that attitude, because, as we all know, in most instances, a

driver can get away with being 10% over the speed limit, plus 5 mph. The PSNI will not admit it, but that is more or less the case. If a 20 mph speed limit were imposed at the right times of day in the vicinity of all schools, people who got caught speeding there would not receive the same sympathy as they do for general speeding convictions. Such a measure would be regarded as a useful traffic control if it were designed to do something important — in this case, save children's lives. I am perfectly happy to support the motion in those terms.

I am not sure who is responsible for the variable traffic controls at schools both here and around the world. I imagine that here it is the Roads Service, or perhaps the police, and that the controls are set automatically. I travel past a set of controls at a school in the Lisburn area fairly regularly on a Sunday. Even though the school gates are closed, the controls blink at 20 mph, advocating that people slow down to that speed. There is absolutely no need for such a speed restriction on a Sunday on a major road to the airport — the speed limit would otherwise be 60 mph. Schools could perhaps control the operation of traffic lights outside their own premises. They know best when large numbers of children come and go and when many cars will be parked outside the school — another factor that adds to the risk of road accidents. That said, the Alliance Party has no problem in supporting the motion and the amendment.

Mr I McCrea: This important motion raises an issue that impacts on all our lives, and on the lives of our children. It should command the support of all Members, and that appears to be the case. I raised the issue previously, and therefore I have no problem whatsoever with the motion.

However, like Mr Lunn, I am not sure about the amendment, as traffic-calming measures are already in place in some neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, I understand the sentiments of the amendment.

It is important that we take into consideration the Twenty's Plenty initiative, which was introduced in Scotland. Mr Lunn mentioned a few negatives aspects of the initiative, but it has proved to be successful in reducing the speed of motorists. When the Scottish Executive conducted a three-year Scotland-wide trial in 1998, the result was a reduction in speed at 60% of sites. It demonstrates that a 20 mph speed limit has an impact and will result in motorists reducing their speeds.

In 2004, the Scottish Executive issued guidance that a 20 mph speed limit should be the norm outside schools. It is important that Members consider the vital difference that a speed limit of 20 mph would make, and my colleague Jim Wells referred to the statistics. There is a one in 40 chance of a pedestrian being killed if he or she is hit by a vehicle travelling at 20 mph.

There is a staggering difference between that and the survival rates of people who have been hit at higher speeds. If the 20 mph speed limit were in operation at peak times in the vicinity of schools, many lives could be saved.

There have been many minor accidents near schools over the years, and there have been many fatal accidents. Not all of those accidents can be attributed to speed, but if the speed limit is reduced to 20 mph in the vicinity of schools, drivers will at least be more aware of their surroundings and they will be able to react more quickly.

As a parent, the safety of my children is of the utmost importance. My children have now reached the age where they are continually asking when they will be allowed to walk or cycle to school. However, my wife and I feel that the roads are too dangerous. The Government and other associated bodies place much emphasis on the health and well-being of children; therefore, walking to school should be encouraged as a means of tackling obesity. However, many education and library boards are gradually removing the provision of lollipop ladies and men, and there is a lack of safe crossing facilities, therefore parents have little option but to drive their children to school.

That aside, over the past few years, great strides have been taken, especially around rural schools, to erect flashing signs, among other signs, to make drivers aware that there is a school nearby. I welcome the initiative, but that alone will not save lives.

I welcome the pilot schemes. I have no doubt that they will prove that a 20 mph speed limit will contribute to making roads in the vicinity of schools safer for schoolchildren. I support the motion.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat. As Sinn Féin's road safety spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, and I thank my colleagues for securing the debate.

Reducing the speed of traffic in the vicinity of schools is an important initiative, as every effort must be taken to improve road safety, especially given the North's poor record for fatalities and serious injuries on the roads.

Speed limits of 20 mph, especially at schools, should be variable and time-dependent to coincide with pupils arriving and leaving school. I welcome the Minister's introduction of the pilot schemes to give the benefit of the speed management at rural schools programme at Castlerock and Ballybogy. It will involve signs with flashing lights at certain times of the day advising drivers to reduce their speed to 20 mph. As other Members have mentioned, there are similar schemes in the Twenty-six Counties and in Scotland. Research from those schemes has shown that there has been a reduction in overall speeds.

We are all too familiar with the difference in survival rates depending on speed, and many colleagues referred to the difference in survival rates at 20 mph and at 40 mph. Therefore, there is a need to reduce speed in the vicinity of schools and neighbourhoods where there is a danger to pedestrians. However, key to the success of any scheme will be an appropriate level of enforcement, especially in addressing speed in rural areas.

Perhaps we should consider the installation of speed cameras. In order for any such initiative to work, we must ensure that drivers are made aware that failure to comply will bring penalties for those who ignore the need to reduce their speed.

4.30 pm

We must also examine the practicalities of this initiative from both urban and rural perspectives. Many rural schools are situated on roads that have high speed limits. We welcome the Minister's initiative. There is not so much of a problem in urban areas, where many speed limits are set at 30 mph. In general, therefore, the initiative will be easier to implement in urban areas.

I welcome the motion and support it. Any initiative that will help to reduce road fatalities will have our support.

Mr Ross: On the face of it, the motion seems like a sensible proposal, which could reduce the chances of children being killed or seriously injured in the vicinity of schools across Northern Ireland. The pilot programmes that are operating in Castlerock and Ballybogy have already been mentioned. Those programmes operate variable speed limits, which are preferable to simply changing the speed limit to a speed that would be enforced in the evenings, or when the schools are off on holidays. Similar schemes in Scotland have also been mentioned, along with ones in New Zealand and Australia, where several progressive road safety programmes have been implemented, including the graduated driving licence scheme, which I support strongly.

Something inventive is required: figures confirm that the majority of drivers exceed the current 30 mph speed limit on our roads. Reports suggest that 58% of car drivers, 54% of motorcyclists and 53% of HGV drivers currently break the speed limits. As we have heard, there is a 20% chance of being killed by a vehicle that is travelling at 30 mph; a fifty-fifty chance of survival at 35 mph, reducing to a 10% chance of survival at 40 mph. The statistics hide the fact that we are talking about people's lives; children are at risk of serious injury. We must discuss practical measures that we can implement in order to reduce the risk of serious injury or death.

The variable signage that alerts motorists when speeding restrictions apply can have a positive impact on reducing driver speeds. Variable signage gives motorists more time to react and reduces stopping distances. Evidence backs up the notion that areas with

20 mph zones have reduced rates of road-traffic accidents. In those areas where reduced speed zones are in operation, accidents involving children have been reduced by 66%. In fact, for every one mile an hour that a motorist reduces his or her speed, the frequency of accidents reduces by a margin of 5%.

It is also worth noting that those types of measures are extremely popular with the public, which goes a long way towards encouraging drivers to obey the speed limit. It is also important that there is clear evidence that those measures are working, as there is a general public cynicism that some measures are more about generating cash through enforcement fines than reducing road deaths and saving lives. The evidence, by and large, suggests that the measures are working, so we must get that message out. The Scottish Executive, for instance, found that speeds were reduced in all regions.

Several Members have quoted from the Department for Transport document, 'Speed: Know your limits', which reports that average speeds in 20 mph zones have reduced by 9 mph, and that there has been a 60% reduction in accident frequency. There has also been a 67% overall reduction in child accidents and a 27% reduction in accidents involving cyclists.

It is also important to recognise that simply installing 20 mph zones will not work. We must continue our efforts to educate drivers and children about the dangers of busy traffic times close to schools. In fact, some of the most dangerous situations for children are when parents are manoeuvring in and out of parking spaces at school entrances, and the children dart in and out between cars without paying attention. Schools and parents, in conjunction with the police in many cases, have an important role to play in ensuring that children are aware of the dangers and take care when around cars at school entrances.

Pedestrians and cyclists must also be aware of the dangers when high volumes of vehicles are parked outside schools at peak times. The speed limit outside one of the schools that was included in the pilot was 60 mph. It is important that in such areas, where a 20 mph zone is being considered, that a gradual slowing down is allowed before entering the slow zone. Likewise, some schools may not need those measures; perhaps we should examine the requirements of each school in isolation.

In my last minute, I will briefly address the amendment tabled by Mr Dallat and Mr Ramsey. Although many of us could identify areas that are in particular need of speed-calming measures, we should concentrate on 20 mph zones outside schools, as that is, at least, a manageable and attainable goal.

I know of a few areas in my constituency whose residents feel that a 20 mph zone is hugely beneficial and dramatically improves road safety. However, to roll out the scheme to all areas of Northern Ireland

would be a mammoth task. There must be a continuation of the efforts to educate motorists on the dangers of speeding and the requirement of safe driving, particularly in built-up areas. I support the motion.

Mr Armstrong: The number of lives being lost on the roads, although falling, is still unacceptably high. I am happy to support both the motion and the amendment — the motion refers to young people, whereas the amendment covers a wider remit. I will first address my remarks to the issue of a restricted speed limit as part of broader traffic-calming measures in the vicinity of schools.

Statistics show that an average of 22 pupils are killed or injured each year when travelling to or from school. Although any death is a huge tragedy for the family and loved ones of the deceased, there is a heightened sense of grief when the victim is a child. It is vital that everything possible is done to protect all children, and that means promoting road safety initiatives. Although children and young people must be taught to stop, look and listen when crossing the road, we must also be mindful that children, especially younger children, are not fully aware of the dangers that they face. The onus is on adults and road users to take extra care.

There is a 25 mph speed limit at a housing estate in Stewartstown, and it makes a difference to the people of that area. The motion merely gives official sanction to something that road users should already be doing as a matter of course; namely, slowing down and taking extra care when driving near a school or any other place where young people are likely to be.

I support the amendment, which seeks to extend the restricted speed limits — part of the broader strategy of traffic-calming measures in the vicinity of schools — to neighbourhoods where speeding traffic poses a risk to people of all ages.

We have won the battle to make drink-driving socially unacceptable and the battle for the compulsory wearing of seatbelts. We must now fight the battle against excessive speed and lack of consideration for other road users, and we must win. I am pleased to support the motion.

Mr Dallat: As a former teacher of road-traffic studies, I fully appreciate the importance of this debate, and am particularly pleased that both the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Education are present. I am sorry that Mr Wilson, the Minister of the Environment, could not be here, because the Department of the Environment has overall responsibility for road safety. However, I am sure that he is otherwise occupied; perhaps he has sent the private detective whom he mentioned yesterday.

Members will remember that an all-party group on road safety was established some time ago. That group is very important, but Pat Ramsey and I were the only

Members present at its most recent meeting last week. That is not a party-political plug; it is simply an appeal to Members to take a special interest in that group and, where possible, to attend its meetings. Road safety is a cross-cutting theme, and, sooner or later, there will be a need for an authority with over-arching responsibility for road safety, similar to that established some time ago in the Republic of Ireland.

Jim Wells referred to the involvement of the Committee for Regional Development. In case Members are unaware, the Committee considered the draft speed-management policy on 12 December 2007 and received an oral briefing from departmental officials.

Members will be pleased to know that, with support from the Assembly's Research and Library Service, we discussed the issue again on 5 March and 9 April. On 23 April, we examined the study of a variable speed limit outside schools in the Republic of Ireland. As Mr Ross said, we also examined the Twenty's Plenty scheme in Scotland. I went to see that scheme in operation — at my own expense, I should add, Mr Deputy Speaker — and was impressed. The amendment is critical because, as Members know, most fatal accidents involving schoolchildren happen within one mile of the child's home.

I was at the launch of the 20 mph speed limit at the Hezlett Primary School near Castlerock, and it was a useful experience. I am not sure whether any Member was at the launch of the scheme at Kilmoyle PS, near Ballybogy. The pilot schemes cost £60,000 each and fully involve the school principal, the school governors and the local community. Therefore, the local communities have assumed ownership of the schemes, which is critical to their success.

If such schemes are to be successful, motorists must react positively to them — if they do not, the schemes are as useless as an ashtray on a motorbike, which is why community involvement is critical. I hope that the widely advertised schemes influence the way that motorists across Northern Ireland — not just those in Castlerock and Ballybogy — drive past schools.

It is important to note that although the number of deaths and serious injuries caused by excessive speed has declined, we are nowhere near as successful as other regions at tackling the problem. In France, the President risked a considerable number of votes by making road safety a political issue. Consequently, the number of deaths on French roads has plummeted, and the same has happened in Scandinavian countries. Therefore, we must be prepared to take decisions that are initially unpopular, just as the smoking ban in pubs was, to address the problem.

It is sad that over the past 40 years, more people were killed on the roads than in the Troubles, and many of those who died were children. I hope that all

Members appreciate the need for the amendment to the motion. We must make a commitment to practise what we preach.

Ms Purvis: I support the motion and the amendment, because our children must be safe, not just during their journeys to and from school, but also after school when they are at home and at play.

It is an inescapable fact that more people die or are seriously injured on Northern Ireland's roads than on roads in England, Scotland and Wales. We all have a responsibility to reduce the number of deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

Part-time speed limits in the vicinity of schools have proven a very effective measure to improve the safety of our children. In my constituency, which is almost entirely urban and where it is difficult to find a school that is not in a built-up area or near a road, I have seen how traffic-calming measures can help to reduce the speed of motorists and increase the safety of children outside schools. For example, speed ramps in Mersey Street have reduced the speed of motorists from 60 mph to 20 mph. On the Ravenhill Road, the Safer Routes to School scheme was introduced several years ago, and there are several initiatives to ensure that motorists know to reduce their speed to 20 mph when children are arriving at or leaving school.

The initiatives include flashing lights that remind motorists that they are in a school-safety zone, large road markings, traffic islands, and sections of road in which motorists are restricted to driving at 20 mph.

4.45 pm

A 20 mph speed limit alone is not adequate, because drivers would become complacent if there were simply a speed-limit sign and nothing else. The speed limit must be introduced in conjunction with other measures. Motorists can spot a 20 mph speed-limit sign, but the speed of those who drive past it day after day could creep up. They need a reminder, such as that which Jim Wells mentioned earlier. When they drive into a speed-restriction zone, a flashing light could tell motorists the speed at which they are travelling or remind them that they are in a restricted zone. Motorists will pay attention and slow down only if they are reminded of where they are. That is most important.

Other Members mentioned enforcement, which presents difficulties. However, when motorists are reminded of the speed at which they should drive, they take responsibility to slow down. According to the campaign group Brake, which has examined statistics on children's safety, a child who is struck by a car that is travelling at 20 mph has a 90% chance of survival. However, if the child is struck at 40 mph, he or she has an 85% chance of being killed. Combine that with the statistic that 53 children are killed or seriously injured on foot and on bicycles each week in the United

Kingdom — around seven children each day — and that reduction in miles per hour does not seem like such an imposition.

Everyone has a responsibility to ensure children's safety — not only when they are travelling to and from school, and while they are there, but after school hours as well. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr G Robinson: I support the motion. A recent television advertising campaign that was aimed at drivers presented the message effectively that the risk of killing or injuring a pedestrian, especially a child, is lowered when speed is reduced. That message reflects statistical evidence from the rest of the UK, and around the world, that speed kills. A child who is struck by a car that is travelling at 20 mph has a 3% chance of being killed; however, if the child is struck by a car that is travelling at 40 mph, he or she has a 90% chance of being killed, according to the Department for Transport in 2004. A 20 mph speed limit makes sense and will save parents from heartbreak.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

A pilot scheme that uses electronically triggered warning lights was run successfully at Hezlett Primary School in my constituency of East Londonderry, and at a school in Ballybogy. The announcement in June 2008 of schemes in the Ballymoney area demonstrates the Minister's belief in the benefits of that method of speed reduction in school environments. The Department for Transport's 2004 report entitled 'Speed: Know your limits' states:

"These measures are not always popular but nevertheless they do work."

That is a sure indication that a 20 mph speed limit is essential in the vicinity of schools or in any built-up area.

Mr Shannon: Is the Member aware that the road safety organisation Brake conducted a survey of around 16,000 children? It presented the results of that survey to Downing Street and requested that the speed limit be reduced to 20 mph outside every school. That document was presented by seven children, who represented the seven children who are knocked down and killed or seriously injured every day.

The results of that survey indicate that six out of 10 of the children who were surveyed felt that roads near their schools are dangerous; a third of them knew someone who had been knocked down; and eight out of 10 teachers said that roads near their schools are dangerous. Does the Member agree that those figures, more than any others, reinforce the need for a 20 mph speed limit outside schools?

Mr G Robinson: The Member makes a valid point.

In areas where the 20 mph speed limit was applied, there was an overall reduction of 67% in the numbers of accidents involving children. In Scotland, where

political will has resulted in proactive decisions, lights are used to warn of the proximity of a school. Results show that there was no significant variation in the reduction of speed on a country-wide basis. That was achieved without significant publicity or enforcement. As the Scots appear to value highly the safety of their children, should we not ensure the same protection from road accidents for our children? A one mph reduction in speed lessens the risk of accident by 5%. We must apply the same protection for our children as is applied in Scotland. As my colleague Jim Shannon said, we need a 20 mph speed limit.

I appreciate that the initial financial outlay is high and that running costs may cause concern. However, solar-powered lights are available and may be used.

What price do we put on a child's life? Let us protect our children as far as we possibly can from danger on the road. The motion for a 20 mph speed limit has a positive part in providing such protection. As the safety message says: speed kills.

I support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: I support the motion and the amendment tabled by my colleagues Pat Ramsey and John Dallat. In November 2007, I asked the Minister a question about a small primary school in my constituency that was eager to be included in a pilot scheme to introduce part-time speed limits. The school's request was refused. As a result, the staff are in dire straits as they try to keep the children who walk to and from school safe. The school is on a rural road, which presents an open invitation to motorists to speed. Some drivers make the unfortunate assumption that this rural road, which is not policed for speed, can be used as an ad hoc racetrack.

In the Shantallow ward in the Foyle constituency, there are 11 primary and secondary schools in social-housing areas. Their pupils run a daily gauntlet of problems associated with ever-increasing traffic.

Children, whatever their age, have a basic right to be safe while travelling to and from school. At present, for many children, their daily walk to school is similar to Russian roulette. A speed of 20 mph is significant where children are about; at that speed, a collision between a car and humans will do considerable harm.

I urge the Minister to give due consideration to the motion and the amendment, and I hope that he will have the good counsel to implement the 20 mph rule in and around schools, whether rural or urban.

The Minister for Regional Development (Mr Murphy): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a thabhairt do mo chara Francie Molloy.

I thank my colleague Francie Molloy for tabling the motion and all Members present for a constructive

debate. Support for the motion has been expressed on all sides of the Chamber, which is encouraging. The Committee for Regional Development has conducted prolonged discussion and examination of the issue, and it is encouraging that members of the Committee who spoke support the pilot projects that have been introduced and variable speed limits. That augurs well, and it seems that a consensus about the best way forward is emerging.

I have asked my officials to read the Hansard report so that if I fail to pick up any of the points made, I can write to the Members concerned after the debate.

Road safety is a key priority for my Department, the Department of the Environment and the PSNI; we all work together to reduce the number of people killed and seriously injured on our roads — including children. For many years, my Department's Roads Service has been proactive in promoting safety at schools through its annual programme of traffic-management measures. In the past, my Department has been asked to consider speed limits at all schools across the North. A previous Minister considered that option but ruled it out in favour of a more targeted approach, and there are good reasons for that.

For much of the time, reduced speed limits at schools may be totally inappropriate, such as at night or at weekends. Experience shows that motorists often ignore appropriate speed limits, thereby bringing such limits into disrepute, and some Members mentioned that in their contributions. Enforcing those speed limits will be a major resource issue for the police. Experience shows that unenforced speed limits fall into disrepute.

As I have said, Roads Service is pursuing a more targeted approach. In 2004, as part of its Safer Routes to School programme, my Department accelerated the provision of signs, road markings and engineering measures outside schools to highlight the presence of schools to motorists. Many of the Members who contributed to today's debate highlighted that 20 mph zones alone would not be enough to guarantee safety and that a range of measures is needed. That is the approach that has been adopted in the Safer Routes to School programme.

Since then, about 140 schools have had measures provided. However, the Department is never complacent, and in 2006, Roads Service accelerated its programme to provide signs and road markings outside schools in rural areas where the speed limit of 60 mph applies. My Department will continue to seek new or innovative measures and methods to reduce the speed of traffic on the road network as a whole. In that regard, new technology has proved particularly effective. Several Members referred to vehicle-activated signs, which tell motorists to slow down, along various roads across the network.

I fully recognise that speeding outside schools is of concern to pupils and parents alike. Earlier this month,

Roads Service initiated a trial of part-time 20 mph speed limits at two schools, one near Castlerock and the other near Ballymoney, to which numerous Members referred. Those 20 mph speed limits are enforced only at the start and finish of the school day when children are most at risk of being involved in a car accident. Early indications show that the pilots, which have been broadly welcomed by the schools and communities involved, have been successful in reducing the speed of traffic.

Trevor Lunn asked about the programming of such signs. I assure him that the programming is carried out in conjunction with schools to ensure that the signs are not in use at the wrong times. Drivers tend to ignore general speed limit signs that operate when they are not needed. The signs used in the pilots must be activated in line with the agreed school activities so that they are effective when they are needed. Roads Service will continue to monitor and assess those pilots to determine their effectiveness in reducing traffic speeds before consideration is given to introducing a more widespread programme.

I want to add a note of caution: the measures are expensive. John Dallat quoted a figure of £60,000 as the cost for each trial site, but it costs around £50,000. We do not have an unlimited budget. Pat Ramsey made a series of demands of DRD, and I look forward to hearing him passionately repeat those demands at the next Budget debate. I will give him my support on that issue.

In 2003, the Scottish Government provided some £27 million worth of funding to roll out a similar initiative at all schools in Scotland, to which various Members made reference. I accept entirely the Members' point that the cost cannot be weighed against the life of a child. However, some 209 schools are situated on the road network where the 60 mph speed limit applies. If we were to roll out the initiative across all those rural schools, it would involve an investment of around £10 million, plus maintenance.

Mr T Clarke: You have given a figure for the cost of the investment; however, I have heard that every life lost on Northern Ireland's roads costs about £1 million.

The Minister for Regional Development: I accept what the Member says, and I do not quote those figures to avoid dealing with the issue. Often, after a Budget debate, Members tell me what resources I should allocate, but it is important that they understand the resource implications. I will remain proactive in seeking solutions to road safety issues outside schools and we will seek to identify the resources required to effect such solutions. I am committed to achieving that.

I am not outlining resource implications as a way to avoid finding solutions to the problem. The issue is very important, and I fully accept the implications of

resources on the loss of life as well as their implications on measures to prevent the loss of life.

5.00 pm

Regarding the introduction of 20 mph speed limits in all neighbourhoods where there is a perceived danger from speeding traffic, I emphasise that the PSNI is responsible for the enforcement of speeding restrictions through its safety-camera scheme. Although my Department's Roads Service encourages and supports 20 mph zones in situations where there is a risk to vulnerable road-users, I have no plans to reduce speed limits in housing estates and other built-up areas to 20 mph. Mr Ramsey asked why this was not planned, and other Members have answered that question in their discussion of the amendment. They stated that where Roads Service has limited resources, resources must be targeted at the areas most at risk. Roads Service targets its resources for traffic calming in residential areas where a need has already been assessed.

I am aware of the introduction of the Twenty's Plenty initiative of advisory 20 mph speed limits and zones in Scotland. My officials have discussed the experiences of that operation with Transport Scotland and other local authorities. Trevor Lunn referred to mixed results from some of those schemes when they were enforced. Other Members referred to examples of best practice elsewhere. I assure Members that the Department will continue to look to other countries and cities for examples of best practice and will try to adopt them.

In some areas — particularly in the case of Scotland — some speed-reducing measures have been very successful, and some not so. They are not a panacea for all our ills. Experience from here and elsewhere has shown that such schemes are only effective when they have the support of the entire local community. John Dallat referred to similar schemes in his constituency and to the community buy-in that exists for them. Such schemes are also effective where the roads on which signs are located do not carry through-traffic. I am referring to residential areas and not the areas outside schools.

Roads Service has provided a number of advisory 20 mph zones in order to test the concept. Members are aware that speed is one of the major causes of traffic collisions on our roads. My Department has recently reviewed its approach to the setting of speed limits. The draft guidelines set out a new approach to the setting of local speed limits across the North, and I hope to bring the speed-management review to the Executive Committee shortly to seek the views of ministerial colleagues before wider consultation.

I assure Members that my Department's Roads Service, the Department of the Environment and the PSNI work in a co-ordinated manner to promote road

safety across the North through education measures, enforcement and road safety engineering measures respectively.

Members will be aware that the 'Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy 2002-12' includes a target of a one-third reduction from the period of 1996-2000 in the average number of people killed or seriously injured on our roads annually. It also aims for a 50% reduction in the number of children killed or seriously injured on our roads each year. Statistics gathered up to 2007 show significant improvements, with reductions of 31% and 57% respectively against the targets for the number of people and children killed or seriously injured, when measured against the average annual number of fatal and serious injuries between 1996 and 2000.

I assure Members that my Department's Roads Service is fully committed to reducing the carnage on our roads and to helping to achieve the casualty-reduction targets set out in the road safety strategy. I thank Members for the many constructive contributions that have been made in what has been a constructive debate.

It is regrettable that Pat Ramsey strayed into the political problems that the Executive are experiencing, and I am very heartened that having spent the past 16 months attacking the Executive, he now feels that one meeting of the Executive would address all the problems.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo.

I am pleased to take part in this important debate. Francie Molloy emphasised the need for obvious signage outside school buildings. He mentioned flashing signs, such as there are in the Republic of Ireland — signs that are powered by solar panels and are, therefore, green.

Mr Molloy also mentioned speed-sensitive warning lights that would alert drivers about excessive speed as they approach schools. He referred to the tragic accident near Ballygawley and suggested that if flashing lights had been fitted to the rear of the bus involved, that accident could have been avoided. He spoke about the importance of signage to draw drivers' attention to the existence of a school in a certain locality. He quoted those awful 2007 statistics of 112 people being killed on our roads and 6,000 people being injured, 813 of them children.

Mr Ramsey explained the amendment and underlined the need for speed restrictions in estates and residential areas. He referred to the Transport Research Laboratory study; it reviewed 250 traffic-calming measures and showed that a 9 mph reduction in speed could lead to a fall of 60% in collisions, a fall of 67% in collisions involving children and a fall of 20% in collisions involving cyclists. He called for the introduction of a

raft of measures in order to make our roads safer not only in the vicinity of schools but in residential areas.

Jim Wells referred to Northern Ireland's poor road safety record, a view that was echoed by John McCallister, who told us the tragic news that between 2002 and 2006, six school pupils were killed on our roads and over 1,000 children were injured. Mr Wells proposed time-targeted 20 mph speed limits outside schools at peak times, referencing Scotland's Twenty's Plenty initiative, which has reduced accidents by 60%. Mr Wells also mentioned the need to facilitate more children being able to walk or cycle to school and said that a speed limit would encourage parents to have the confidence to support their children to get up on their feet or on their bicycles.

Trevor Lunn underlined the need not only for speed restrictions but for the enforcement of speed limits, saying that speed limits alone are not effective unless they are enforced. Ian McCrea was unsure about the amendment, believing that traffic-calming measures that are already in place act as a deterrent to speeding in residential areas. However, if 20 mph speed limits were properly enforced in residential areas, surely there would be no need for traffic-calming measures, which are extremely difficult to secure from the authorities.

The Minister must take Members' comments on board and act to save lives. However, what we have heard from the Minister is that we will get more of the same, and that is disappointing. We need consistency in policy; inconsistency will lead to confusion, which will, sadly, lead to loss of life. Drivers need to know what restrictions have been imposed outside all schools and in all residential areas. We cannot have different sets of regulations for every school and residential area. I ask the Minister to listen carefully to what Members have said and to consult, once again, with his officials, based on this debate. The Minister must ensure that a 20 mph speed limit is enforced outside schools and in residential areas.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank all Members who contributed to this constructive debate. Francie Molloy and I tabled the motion because of our frustration in trying to secure increased traffic-calming measures and reduced speed limits in the vicinity of schools. I have been contacted by many principals and concerned parents about child safety at the peak times of the start and finish of the school day.

As I said, I found myself quite frustrated in my attempts to have traffic calming measures introduced outside schools, and several Members spoke of similar experiences.

Many schools in my Mid Ulster constituency fall into the category that would allow them to have traffic-calming measures introduced. Mid Ulster is a

rural constituency, and many of its rural primary schools are on roads that have 60 mph speed limits. One such school is St Joseph's Primary School at Galbally, County Tyrone. The road that runs in front of that school has a speed limit of 60 mph. Over the years, parents have expressed concern about the safety of their children and about the potential dangers of the speed and volume of traffic using that road during the school term.

Despite the fact that, over the years, there has been constant lobbying on the matter, we have been unsuccessful in securing the introduction of traffic-calming measures on that road. That is because the legislation states that in order to be considered for traffic-calming measures, such as speed bumps, there must be a speed limit of 30 mph on the stretch of road in question. As a result, schools that are on roads that have speed limits of more than 30 mph are excluded from having traffic-calming measures introduced.

The motion is an attempt to highlight to the Minister that there is a definite need to have traffic-calming measures outside every school. I am sure that he is only too aware of the concerns that Members expressed during the debate. He obviously considered those concerns to be valid when he introduced the pilot project — to which several Members referred — at two schools in the North.

That pilot project is a trial of part-time speed limits, which means that they are enforceable at the beginning and the end of the school day, which are the periods of greatest risk to the children. On the BBC radio programme 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning, the principal of one of the pilot-project schools suggested that there has already been an improvement in the traffic situation outside his school, and that is with the project having been in place since only the start of the school year.

I hope that the success of those pilot schemes continues and that that will be sufficient evidence to persuade the Minister to implement a 20 mph speed limit, with associated traffic-calming measures, in the vicinity of all schools.

Speed is one of the biggest contributory factors to carnage on the roads. Many Members referred to startling facts and statistics about speed and its effects. I will give three examples with regard to those statistics. If a pedestrian is hit by a vehicle at 20 mph, there is a 2.5% chance of being killed; if hit at 30 mph, there is a 20% chance of being killed; and if hit at 40 mph, there is a 90% chance of being killed. Those statistics alone should be enough to warrant a 20 mph speed limit outside our schools.

Many Members referred to the Scottish model, whereby the Scottish Executive issued guidance stating that a 20 mph speed limit should be the norm outside all schools. A key finding of a review of a trial of

part-time speed limits outside schools in Scotland was that speed was reduced. Indeed, the working group that was established to deal with that was surprised to find that the results were better than expected.

I hope that at the end of the trial period of the two pilot schemes introduced by the Minister we, too, find positive results and that he will implement a system that will improve the safety of all our children.

The Minister made the point, as did Dawn Purvis, that research suggests that reducing speed limits without associated signage is not effective and that it usually slows traffic by approximately only one mph. Associated signage is, therefore, needed in order to maximise the potential of any changes.

Pat Ramsey expressed concern about the motion not going far enough. I reiterate to the SDLP that Sinn Féin is committed to overall road safety, but the motion focused on schools because that is where children are concentrated most. That said, however, we have decided to accept the amendment.

Jim Wells began his contribution by worrying about his career. I am not sure whether he has left the Chamber, but he said that he wanted to congratulate the Minister. However, he should never say never; one never knows when one might decide to congratulate the Minister. He spoke of the good work of the Committee for Regional Development in considering traffic calming and road safety in general.

John McCallister and Ian McCrea spoke of the health benefits to be gained if children can walk to school and about how parental confidence is necessary in order for that to happen. Trevor Lunn and Cathal Boylan spoke of problems with enforcement, and I agree that there is a role for DRD, DOE and the PSNI in ensuring increased levels of road safety.

5.15 pm

Alastair Ross spoke of the need for more education for drivers, and I share his concern. All Members have a role to play in that. I noted that the Minister of Education was present for a large part of the debate, and I am sure that she listened to everything that was said.

I welcome John Dallat's comment that road safety is a cross-cutting issue, and I appreciate that other Departments have a role to play. Dawn Purvis mentioned that she had experience of how reduced speed limits and traffic calming led to improvements in her area.

I thank the Minister for his comments and for his commitment to addressing road safety issues. I note the draft policy on speed management, and I look forward to the Minister introducing policies and measures that will lead to a safer environment for all children.

In conclusion, the safety of children is paramount. From the moment that they leave home in the morning,

until their return in the evening, parents want them to be in the safest possible environment. The proposal for a restricted speed limit would lead to enhanced safety for all children, and I thank Members for their support. Go raibh maith agat.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to consider introducing a 20 mph restricted speed limit as part of a broader package of traffic calming measures in the vicinity of schools and neighbourhoods where the risk of speeding traffic constitutes a particular danger to pedestrians, especially children and older people.

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

Motion made:

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

ADJOURNMENT

Development of the Magee Campus of the University of Ulster

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic has 15 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak have approximately 12 minutes.

Mr P Ramsey: I doubt that I will speak for the full 15 minutes.

I welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning to the debate, and I thank all other Members who have remained in the Chamber.

I am here to argue for more university places for the Magee campus of the University of Ulster. Urgent action must be taken, and plans must be made, for the development of that campus. The city needs the university to achieve — as soon as possible — its stated aim of growing the campus to accommodate at least 10,000 students. Such development is by far the most important economic initiative that could happen in the region.

Derry is the capital of the north-west of Ireland and the centre of a drive-to-work population far in excess of 350,000. Over the past decade at least, cities of a similar size in Ireland — specifically Cork, Limerick and Galway — have experienced high levels of high-value-added employment and low levels of unemployment. Those university cities each have a student population of approximately 14,000. The universities are powerful providers of knowledge; they supply graduates to the economy, facilitate technology transfer and lead to the creation of spin-off companies. Universities are the consistent drivers of the economy and are the speculative engines that produce knowledge for future industries.

The substantial universities in Cork, Limerick and Galway have grown as a direct result of a deliberate Government policy to develop those regions. It is worth noting that those cities achieved full employment before other major infrastructural investments in transport, and so forth, were made. The primary and strategically most important investments were made in the universities. Given the economic success of those regional cities, their developmental example should be copied.

The University of Ulster's campus in Derry has a student body of fewer than 3,000 undergraduates. In 2005, the University of Ulster's announcement of its

strategic intention to expand the Magee campus to accommodate 10,000 students was warmly welcomed by all sectors in the city. Before 2005, the university had acquired new land for development, with the full support of those sectors in the city. Since then, the number of students at the campus has decreased, and there is no apparent drive or determination to reverse that trend.

Excluding the school of art and design in Belfast, the Magee campus is the smallest of the University of Ulster's campuses. Belfast, including Queen's University, the Jordanstown campus and the school of art and design, has more than 24,000 undergraduate students. That is around nine times the number of university students in Derry. The Coleraine campus has 3,800 students, yet Coleraine is a medium-sized regional town that does not have the economic development potential or requirement of Derry.

The whole point of the persistent arguments for growth at the Magee campus is that investment in higher education can be turned into investment in high-quality jobs. Magee Science Research Park, which employs 370 people, is by far the most successful of the university's science parks. Coleraine Science Research Park has 49 employees, despite the fact that the Coleraine campus has more IT students than the Magee campus and has a major centre for life and health sciences.

Derry has received major investment from IT companies, including Seagate, Stream, Fujitsu and Northbrook Technology, but the number of graduates limits its ability to grow the sector. In order for the city to reach its economic potential, investment must be made in the campus.

A further potential economic advantage is that Derry is on the border. Three miles from Derry city centre is a region that enjoys a corporation tax regime of 12.5%. Were Belfast to have such an advantage, there is no doubt that such an opportunity would be seized and that the location would be bursting at the seams with investment. That source of competitive advantage that Derry has is ignored. Although that tax zone is so close to Derry, I know of no strategy that aims to take advantage of it, and I do not know the reason for that.

There is no reason why major manufacturing companies in advanced technologies should not locate there to take advantage of the entire north-west's advanced workforce. However, the economic offering must include a much more substantial university presence than currently exists.

Given the importance of university activities to economic development, it is a matter of extreme concern that the Minister for Employment and Learning, nor anyone else in the Executive, seems to have control over where investments are made. In response to a

question for written answer that I submitted to the Minister on the locations of student numbers, he stated:

"The distribution of places across individual campuses is entirely a matter for each university". — [*Official Report, Vol 27, pWA23, col 1*].

I urge the Minister to seek some control over that. When I discussed the matter with senior members of the University of Ulster's management, they were surprised and shocked to learn his response. They explained that previous Ministers had made it clear where investments should be made during the university's various development phases.

I know that the Minister believes passionately in education and that he is committed to economic development and fairness. I know that because of the decisions that he made in his previous ministerial post. He made courageous and imaginative decisions, because those were the right decisions to make. From a north-west perspective, he was closely involved — along with Mark Durkan, who was the then Minister of Finance and Personnel — with the gas-pipeline decision that brought gas to the north-west and allowed electricity generation to continue at Coolkeeragh power station.

The Minister for Employment and Learning now has an opportunity to make an even greater contribution — one that would mean that the north-west would no longer be a place of high unemployment but a place of high employment. The people of the north-west are committed to a better future, and to creating a city and region of which to be proud. They want to create a welcoming, open and prosperous place for their children and for people who wish to make the region their home. However, that cannot be done unless there are visionary leaders in positions of power who will make the right strategic decisions on regional infrastructure.

The Minister has shown that he is a man of vision and of action. He is in a position to have a profound, positive and sustained impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. We want a bright, brand new day and hope for the future. I appeal to the Minister to consider strongly the arguments that have been presented to him today. We had a brief meeting with the Minister last week, at which the issue was discussed. I hope that, after listening to Members' contributions to the debate, a meeting to follow through on that can be arranged in a more informal setting on the case that is required for the north-west of Ireland.

That case is overwhelming and has, clearly, been a sore point in Derry for decades. John Hume took up politics in 1966 after the then Stormont regime's decision to locate the University of Ulster in Coleraine. That decision was wrong, and we need coherent and decisive strategic leadership from the Department for Employment and Learning. I urge the Minister to listen to other Members and to introduce such proposals.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo chéad buíochas a thabhairt do Pat Ramsey as an díospóireacht seo a thógáil. Tugaim buíochas fosta don Aire as a bheith anseo inniu.

I thank Pat Ramsey for securing the Adjournment debate, and I welcome the Minister's presence. The expansion of Magee university is an issue that, as the Minister knows, unites the city politically, culturally and socially. As Pat Ramsey said, the expansion of Magee — which makes its own case — must be put in the context of the regeneration of Derry and the entire north-west region. It would help the area to achieve the Executive's goal of tackling regional disparity and uneven development.

Uneven development has, for decades, been a characteristic of life in the north-west. However, the purpose of today's debate is not to apportion blame or to complain about the past, but to outline to the Minister the reasons why the expansion of Magee could be a key driver in tackling regional disparity and the ensuing inequality.

Despite its large population, Derry does not enjoy the status of a university city. Pat Ramsey outlined the experiences of Limerick, Cork and other cities, and on examination of cities in England and Scotland, it is apparent that Derry should have a better university. That necessity is reflected in Derry's low number of private-sector graduates, research and development projects and departments. Moreover, in Derry, more people leave to attend university than in other towns, and it has the lowest percentage of population — of any city of its size — attending university. That is the wider impact of not having a big enough university.

That situation could change and, perhaps, should change, and I hope that the Minister will play his part in that. The university has outlined its case and pointed the way, and one immediate step could be to raise the student cap from 4,000 to 10,000. Irrespective of the impact on the university, that measure would have wider social and economic benefits for our city. It would enable the university to extend its range of courses and thus attract important facilities and departments such as research and development and, in particular, medical training.

Magee has already conducted some imaging work, and that excellent facility could grow. The existence of two major hospitals in Letterkenny and Derry would assist that growth. That growth would allow courses to be taught on site, and would reflect the need for inward investment. Moreover, as the Minister will be aware, it would encourage graduates to stay in Derry after the completion of their degree. The city could benefit economically from those people's skills and knowledge.

However, much land is needed for such an expansion; that is a problem that the Minister, and the university, must face. The Minister has a role — not alone, but with others — and I hope that he will, today, outline his engagement with the Department of Education, the University of Ulster and the various landholders. The university is concerned that a complicated property chain might delay any expansion if not everybody was in agreement. Through our political contacts — and I am sure that all Members from the city have similar experiences — we have found that everyone wants to play their part and assist the expansion of the university and the social and economic growth of the city. Go raibh maith agat.

5.30 pm

Mrs M Bradley: I apologise for the absence of Mark Durkan, the MP for Foyle. He very much wanted to be part of this debate, but he is unable to be here.

I thank the Minister for attending this adjournment debate. My colleague Pat Ramsey already covered many of the points of contention pertaining to the Magee campus. Therefore, I have no intention of going over ground that has already been covered.

There is a distinct and well-defined need for job creation in the Foyle constituency. It is vital that the university is nurtured and catered for in order to enhance the academic opportunities that are open to students from the city and from further afield. The university has already secured land in and around the existing campus, so there is an urgent need for it to develop its course availability. The creation of additional courses should help to create the jobs to which I referred.

Many young people do not want to study outside their home town. However, many of those students have no option but to travel to other universities and — in the majority of cases — incur additional living expenses and the need to rent accommodation.

Over the years, many university cities have experienced huge economic growth as a direct result of investment in the universities and their course provision. Many of those places have much smaller populations than Derry. Foyle is in need: it needs jobs, but the city's industry that is gaining economic investment is the very sector that cannot find enough graduates to employ. That is an atrocious situation — one that must be rectified urgently.

It is my wish that — for the first time ever — the city's students can stay in their own homes while studying for the third-level qualification of their choice and that they should not be selective or punished financially just because their chosen course is not on offer at their local university. Derry is growing at a constant rate, and the associated academic opportunities must ultimately accompany that rate of growth if any sound economic base is to be developed.

Derry is in a prime position, as its natural hinterland is Donegal. At present, the Magee campus loses thousands of students from Donegal to universities further afield. It makes good economic sense to assist development at Magee and, in turn, to enhance the links that have already been forged with Donegal in areas such as the economy and healthcare.

I have every confidence that the Minister will give whatever support he can to this matter. I thank him for listening to the case.

The Minister for Employment and Learning (Sir Reg Empey): I thank the Members for bringing this debate to the House and for their participation in it. I know that the issue is particularly important to Mr Pat Ramsey and his constituents, and the matter has been raised with me several times. The issue is also of strategic importance to the university itself.

The University of Ulster's Magee campus plays an important role in the economic, social and cultural life of our second city. It provides employment to more than 600 staff and — at 2005 and 2006 levels — it contributes around £20 million a year to the economy of the region. The campus is home to the university's Department of International Business and boasts a business liaison office that works with local businesses to help them achieve their potential and to develop innovative products. It also boasts course provision as diverse as business studies, intelligence systems and dance.

The campus can also be credited with the development of the Step-Up programme; a unique partnership with industry and local schools that is designed to provide educational opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Since its inception in 2000, the programme has been hugely successful in achieving its objectives of raising the aspirations, motivation and performance of students who might otherwise never have ventured near a university. The programme is now held as a model of best practice across the UK.

Equally, the role of the campus in the cultural life of the city should not be underestimated. It enhances culture through teaching and learning and through a wealth of events held throughout the year. It boasts the Tip O'Neill Chair in Peace Studies and has hosted a series of lectures by high-profile international figures, including the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, Bill and Hillary Clinton, Senator John Kerry, and the former EU President Romano Prodi.

In addition, in recent months, the university has facilitated a working party to explore the city's potential to become a city of culture, and I commend it for those endeavours.

I am confident that the university has an important role to play in the economic development of the north-west and of Northern Ireland as a whole, and any

expansion of the campus will certainly help to achieve that. However, we should not lose sight of the steps that have been taken, and continue to take place, in achieving that aim.

Equally, we must bear in mind that responsibility for economic development does not fall solely to the University of Ulster or, indeed, to my Department. It requires a collaborative approach from me and from my colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the development agencies, the city council and, of course, our partners in organisations such as the University of Ulster, further education colleges and employers.

In that context, the university has committed itself to providing courses that are deemed necessary for the region's economic development. For example, it intends to build on its current provision in computing and engineering, with a priority to expand into construction and building, creative technologies and business services. In engineering, the university also envisages an expansion of the development of medical devices, and that was mentioned by Mr McCartney.

The university is firmly of the view that it should focus its attention on creating graduate-level jobs for the people of the north-west, and not simply on graduate-level jobs in the north-west — that is an important distinction. I am sure that Members will join me in supporting the university's adoption of such an approach.

Examples of that approach in action include the establishment of the Intelligent Systems Research Centre. To house that centre, the university is in the process of taking over the building on the Strand Road that it previously leased to Northbrook Technology. In turn, that will be used to facilitate the expansion of research, particularly at doctorate level.

This year, following successful accreditation by the Law Society, the university introduced post-graduate professional legal education at the campus. Consequently, for the first time, students who wish to qualify as solicitors can undertake their training outside Belfast. That will complement the university's undergraduate law provision at Magee. Furthermore, a new undergraduate programme in creative technologies has been launched this year.

The university has a long-standing aspiration to create a graduate-entry medical school at the Magee campus. In partnership with healthcare bodies North and South, including the National University of Ireland, Galway, discussions to achieve that are ongoing, although it will be subject to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's workforce planning.

With regard to medicine, a proposal is being considered for a unique research facility in the area of biomedical

services at Altnagelvin Hospital. Later this year, when the centre is fully operational it will assist in the future recruitment and retention of research-active clinicians of the highest calibre.

As I am sure Members are aware, the university has, in partnership with Letterkenny Institute of Technology, commissioned a scoping study to assess future demand for higher-education, and any new, courses in the north-west. The report from that study should be available later this year, and it will have implications for any expansion of Magee.

As part of the Programme for Government, my Department is committed to providing additional PhD places over the next three years. I am pleased to announce that 34 of the additional 100 places this year have been allocated to the University of Ulster, and I am happy to advise Members of the subject areas in which they have been provided.

That brings me to an important point in the debate: although my Department can provide additional funding to the university for course provision targeted towards the economy's requirements, it cannot dictate to the university where those courses should be based. Of course, that brings advantages and disadvantages. Nowadays, universities are incorporated bodies with their own boards, and although Departments might have directed funding in the past, that is no longer policy. Nevertheless, I am conscious that when significant amounts of public funding are being expended, it is inevitable that Members will seek to ascertain how and where that money is spent. That is perfectly understandable and is part of the accountability process.

The impact of the physical landscape of the Magee campus on any proposed expansion must also be borne in mind. The university advises that any expansion is subject to the procurement of land owned by Foyle and Londonderry College and the redevelopment of the former Fort George army site. Discussions are continuing between the university and the school. When I visited the site earlier this year, the vice chancellor showed me the geography and pointed out where an education corridor might be developed along that part of the city. I see the advantages in that.

Parts of the site are relatively congested and, although there are new buildings there, one can immediately see the physical limitations to its significant expansion. It would be foolish not to recognise that.

I stress that the economic development of the north-west relates to more than just higher education, including the Magee campus of the University of Ulster. I am committed to the development of further education as a significant part of the infrastructure that is required to further develop the city.

My Department is determined to ensure that present and future workforces have the skills that employers

need. In that context, on 9 October 2008 the first all-island skills conference will be held in the north-west. I agreed that initiative in September last year with my then counterparts Micheál Martin and Mary Hanafin, both of whom have moved on. The conference will concentrate on issues in border areas. A key issue will be whether further and higher education institutes are providing people with skills that employers need.

Therefore, it was decided to gather labour-market intelligence over the past year. After the conference on 9 October, the aim is to share that information with the wider community. It is important that such a unique event — held in the north-west but covering all border areas — sends a signal: if we can produce the right people for local employers there is something for people to aim for and young people will not be driven away. Employers are going far afield to recruit the right people. Therefore, the mix is wrong, which is an issue that the conference will address.

A skills expert group with representatives from across the water, from the Republic and from the United States has been established in Northern Ireland. Those workforce development forums, including one based in the north-west, are being invited to come together with local employers and local education providers to ensure that we get accurate feedback about what businesses need.

While I was Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the previous Executive, the then Industrial Development Board and my Department arranged to share investment information with our equivalent authorities in the Republic of Ireland. At that time, Mary Harney was my counterpart in the Republic. If a potential investor was to come along, the objective was to work together in order to capture that investment.

The tax regime was mentioned by Pat Ramsey during the debate. Of course that is a major issue but we must understand that, if a project were to come along, there would be some squealing match over where the actual investment is located. Therefore, a mechanism is needed to deal with such matters.

The report on the Letterkenny arrangements will be released towards the end of this year, and I look forward to seeing what possibilities emerge from it.

I want to make several matters clear. The Department does not dictate what the university authorities do, but any suggestions or requests that they make will be received positively.

I have not received any such requests. If it is a matter of considering caps on student numbers, the maximum student number cap, as it is known, is purely a cost-control measure. If a university presented me with proposals and said that it cannot take on any more students in economically relevant subject areas because of its

cap, I will consider that; however, I must be approached. If a proposal is produced it will be assessed.

5.45 pm

Currently, there are approximately 3,700 students enrolled at the university campus. That ranges from full-time and part-time undergraduates to those studying at post-graduate level. The university's target is 10,000 students and, again, that will cover all categories. We are not yet aware of the possibilities presented by the co-operation with Letterkenny Institute of Technology, but we will have a clear idea of that after the next few months.

I accept entirely the point that a university can make a disproportionate contribution to the economic, social and cultural life of a city — that goes without saying. I acknowledge that most cities that have thriving universities tend to get spin-off advantages. As far as my Department is concerned, we are not constraining the university college, or the university, and we are not standing in the way of any proposals. I do not believe that we are holding back or refusing any proposals currently.

If the university comes to my Department with proposals, we will consider those and their cost implications closely. To me, the land deal seems to be critical to the issue, because the campus is on a relatively congested site — the future lies with concluding that deal. If that space is created, other opportunities will also exist. Otherwise, it will be like squeezing a quart into a pint pot, so to speak — the site is relatively congested, and that is one of the key issues.

However, the university's ultimate plans are also critical. The university shares its capital programme — as it must — with several public bodies from which it draws funding, including, but not exclusively, my Department. It was suggested that a follow-up meeting is held to consider the issue in more detail — I am very open to that; it is not a difficulty. I welcome any information pertaining to the land issue, information regarding whether the report on the co-operation with Letterkenny Institute of Technology could be beneficial to us, or any other suggestions that Members might have.

My Department will try to help the university in any way that we can, and if it does approach us with proposals I assure Members that all aspects of those will be considered very carefully, because we are in the business of ensuring that we have the most skilled workforce possible.

We are also interested in the spin-offs that can result from having a university in a city — that is where growth comes from. America, in particular, has been very successful in encouraging economic spin-offs from its universities by understanding the business mind and how the research and work that is done in universities can be channelled and turned into jobs and into money. We, in this country, are getting better at

that, but we still have some way to go. I assure Members that my Department will offer them an open door with regard to this issue, and if the university comes to us with any proposals we will certainly consider those carefully.

Adjourned at 5.49 pm.

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