
Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 28 June 2010

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before I proceed to today's business, I have a number of announcements to make. I have received a letter from David Simpson notifying me that he will resign as a Member of the Assembly with effect from Thursday 1 July. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer. I have also received the resignations of Mr Stephen Moutray as a member of the Assembly Commission and of Mr Peter Weir as Chairperson of the Audit Committee and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. The resignations take effect from today, and, therefore, a vacancy exists on the Commission. A motion in relation to that will come before the House later today.

I also inform Members that the nominating officer of the Democratic Unionist Party, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, has nominated Mr Stephen Moutray as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with effect from Wednesday 23 June. Mr Moutray has accepted the appointment. In addition, the nominating officer of the SDLP, Ms Margaret Ritchie, has nominated Mr Declan O'Loan as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure with effect from Friday 25 June, to replace Mr Pat Ramsey and Mr P J Bradley, the current holders of the positions. Mr O'Loan has accepted both appointments.

I am satisfied that all correspondence meets the requirements of Standing Orders. Therefore, I confirm Mr Stephen Moutray as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development with effect from Wednesday 23 June and Mr Declan O'Loan as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges and Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure with effect from Friday 25 June.

Public Petitions

Out-of-hours GP service in Limavady

Mr Speaker: Mr George Robinson has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr G Robinson: I wish to present to the Assembly a public petition in relation to the 40% front line cuts that are being planned from 1 July 2010 to the vital out-of-hours GP service in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area and specifically in relation to Limavady borough. The petition contains the names of 5,868 residents from throughout the Limavady borough. The signatures were collected in a two-week period, and their number reflects the deep concerns of the Limavady population about the planned reductions to the service. As a public representative, I have been urging the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to rethink the planned 40% front line cuts. I do so in the knowledge that I have cross-community support for the retention of such a vital service in its present form. Mr Speaker, I present the petition to you in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr G Robinson moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I will send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Summer Schemes for Children with Learning Disabilities

Mr Speaker: Mr Tommy Gallagher has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22.

Mr Gallagher: Mr Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to present this public petition to the Assembly on behalf of probably the most vulnerable group in society: children with severe learning difficulties. The petition has been signed mainly by people from the Western and Southern Health and Social Care Trust areas, but it also includes the signatures of people from all over Northern Ireland who contacted me to ask for the scheme to be reinstated, even at this late stage. The petition contains at least 2,000 signatures and, on behalf of the people who signed it, particularly the families who are affected by the decision, I present the petition to you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Gallagher moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Education, and I will send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee for Education.

Executive Committee Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(4) be suspended for 28 June 2010.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) and 10(4) be suspended for 28 June 2010.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Tourism Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that she wishes to make a statement.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (Mrs Foster): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, on a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in tourism sectoral format. The meeting was held in Armagh on 16 June 2010. The junior Minister Mr Gerry Kelly and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport. The statement has been agreed with junior Minister Kelly, and I make it on behalf of us both.

The Council received updates from the chairperson of Tourism Ireland, Mr Hugh Friel, and its chief executive, Mr Niall Gibbons, on the impact of the continuing difficult global conditions on the tourism industry. The Council also received reports on market campaigns, including the £18 million summer marketing campaign, and on the outlook for the rest of the year.

The Council approved Tourism Ireland's 2010 business plan and noted its plans to return to growth in visitor numbers during 2010 by focusing on best prospect markets and spreading the value message in tactical marketing campaigns. The Council noted the progress that Tourism Ireland has made to date in drafting its corporate plan for 2011-13 and the key marketing themes during the lifetime of the plan, including the Titanic centenary anniversary, the diaspora, the 1911 census centenary and the London Olympics.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment

(Mr A Maginness): I thank the Minister for her statement, but I am a little surprised by its sparseness and lack of detail. I seek the Minister's reassurance that that is not indicative of any attempt to diminish in any way the nature of North/South ministerial contact. However, the statement included an important point on the impact of the continuing difficult global conditions on the tourism industry. The chief

executive of Tourism Ireland indicated ways and means to deal with that. Will the Minister expand on the chief executive's report on how to deal with difficult global conditions?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Chairman for his comments. The statement reflects the topics that were discussed at the NSMC. The reason why there is not more detail is that I wanted to respond to questions rather than regurgitating the statement's contents, which is often what happens in the House. I am happy to go into detail about any discussions at the meeting.

There was a discussion with the chairperson and the chief executive of Tourism Ireland about the difficulties that we face in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland because of a downward trend and the fact that more people are holidaying within the confines of their own jurisdiction. As I have said in the House previously, that is partly due to a refocusing on marketing investment in Great Britain, which is Northern Ireland's biggest tourism market, Germany and North America to generate the best short-term returns. At present, the trend is for people not to book holidays until the very last moment. We are trying to ensure that, when people are considering last-minute holidays, Northern Ireland will be at the forefront of their mind. To that end, an £18 million marketing strategy has begun, with Tourism Ireland concentrating on those three markets and examining different ways to get people to consider Northern Ireland. There are people called "silver surfers", and we are trying to encourage such older people to consider Northern Ireland as a possible holiday destination. I hear laughter from Members sitting behind me, who may not be over 66 years of age but may count themselves as silver surfers.

We are also considering value golf breaks and trying to position ourselves in that market — and why not after what Graeme McDowell did for us in America last week? I was in America last week on a trade mission, and the focus on Northern Ireland was tremendous because of Graeme McDowell's win last Sunday in the US Open. People were congratulating me simply because I was from Northern Ireland. That market has tremendous potential. Tourism Ireland is examining that potential and seeking ways in which to benefit from it.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for her statement. I also congratulate her on her efforts in promoting business in America. She is very photogenic; there are lots of photographs, and we were able to keep track of her the whole week. I am not a silver surfer, but I still have a little bit of silver hair left along the sides if not on top of my head.

I want to ask the Minister about visitor numbers. This morning, I spoke to Brian Ambrose, the manager of George Best Belfast City Airport, who told me that his numbers are up by some 8% from last year. That is good news. The Minister would accept that the past year has been difficult for overseas visitor numbers, and there has probably been a general fall in numbers because of the volcanic ash. What steps is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment taking to address the general fall in worldwide tourism because of the volcanic ash and the economic downturn? It is important that we have a process in place to address that.

12.15 pm

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: The Member raised a number of issues. Tourist numbers have been a mixed bag. The number of people visiting from the Republic of Ireland is up year on year. In fact, the most recent figures that I saw showed that the number went up by about 39% last year. Indeed, when I was coming back from San Francisco last week, I noticed that a record number of tourists — around 9.3 million — visited Belfast last year. That is marvellous, and we want to see more of that. However, there has been an overall downward trend. As the Member said, that is down to a number of reasons, including the global downturn and the uncertainty that the volcanic ash caused.

As I said, Tourism Ireland is involved in a heavy marketing campaign in Great Britain, Germany and North America. In addition to that, I am hoping to meet the Minister for Regional Development in the near future to discuss the volcanic ash issue to see whether we can do more in readiness in case that becomes a problem again in the summer. We are looking for ways to deal with the immediate problems. However, it is also important to look to long-term strategies.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give us a breakdown of the amount of money that will be

spent on that marketing campaign, particularly in Britain? Now that England is out of the World Cup, we are looking for quick wins. Therefore, will we get more return from our money with more people from England holidaying here?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: I wondered which Member would be the first to mention England's demise in the World Cup; full points to Mr Maskey.

I do not have a breakdown of the figures for the amount that will be spent on marketing in GB, North America and Germany. However, GB is our main tourist market, and I know that when I speak to the chief executive of Tourism Ireland he will tell me that, because of that, he concentrates heavily on it not only because of the direct flight access but because of the strong ferry links. We are seeing more and more emphasis on car touring, for example. It is important that we look at all the ways in which we can get visitors to come to Northern Ireland. People have been telling me how much they have enjoyed staying at home in Northern Ireland over the past two to three weeks because of the good weather. However, we also want to see more people coming into Northern Ireland to enjoy what is going on.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her statement. The question that I was going to ask has been fairly well answered. Recently, I have had two or three complaints from Americans who are on holiday in Northern Ireland. They said that, although they love the country and the people, there have been one or two times when they felt that the personal skills of the people helping them have been poor. Will the Minister tell the House whether we will be instigating a campaign, through Tourism Ireland, to improve how we look after tourists?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Howard Hastings, who is the current chairman of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, takes a particular interest in that area. In fact, he has met the Minister for Employment and Learning to talk to him about skills in the hospitality sector. The Member is absolutely right: there is no point in our having a product if we cannot deliver it in a meaningful way in Northern Ireland.

I know of some good exemplars in the hospitality sector, not least those in my constituency. For example, staff at the Lough Erne golf resort are skilled up to deal with people when they

arrive. I hope that more skills and training can be put into the hospitality sector. Sometimes people are a bit snippy, if I can put it like that, about that sector in so far as they look at it as the poor relation. However, I have always said that, if we are to make tourism an economic driver in Northern Ireland, we need to work at every single level. I welcome the work that the Department for Employment and Learning has been doing to grow skills in the tourism sector.

Mr Neeson: I am somewhat jealous of the Minister's visit to San Francisco last week. A number of years ago, I worked out of San Francisco for a while on behalf of the then Department of Economic Development.

I am pleased that the Minister raised the issue of the Titanic centenary. Will she describe to the House the importance not only of the Titanic signature project but of other signature projects in the development of tourism? Will she explain how those projects are falling into line with the development of tourism?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: I thank the Member for his question. We were in San Francisco primarily on a trade and investment mission. However, we also took the opportunity to hold a Tourism Ireland reception to which all those connected with the tourism sector were invited. At that reception, we had an excellent presentation on the five signature projects that are moving forward, which was the basis on which I made my speech to the reception.

In respect of the Titanic centenary, at the end of September we will be taking part in a new Titanic exhibition in Grand Central station in New York. That will be a very exciting event, because millions of people — I do not have the exact figures in front of me — pass through that station every day. Therefore, the event will give us recognition for the fact that the Titanic was made in Belfast, as opposed to any of the other places that may try to take ownership.

In Northern Ireland, 2012 will be a hugely significant year for tourism, not least because of the Titanic projects. Also, the new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway will then be finished. We are waiting to hear about Londonderry's bid for the city of culture, which falls in with the Walled City signature project. Also, let us not forget that investment is still going on apace in the St Patrick/Christian heritage and Mournes signature projects. Having

started at different levels, I am pleased to say that all signature projects are now moving ahead and coming along nicely. I am delighted that I can use that offering to sell Northern Ireland when we go to places such as San Francisco.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for her statement. What is Tourism Ireland doing to increase the number of tourists that come to Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: GB has always been our strongest market for tourists coming to Northern Ireland, not least because of the connection between friends and family. I see that as something that will continue. Unfortunately, however, last year saw a significant drop in numbers because of the downturn and the fact that people were staying in GB rather than coming across to Northern Ireland. Tourism Ireland's £18 million marketing campaign, which concentrates on GB, Germany and North America, will help put Northern Ireland as a proposition at the top of people's lists when they are deciding where to go on holiday. I commend Tourism Ireland for the work that it is doing on that marketing campaign and hope that it can make Northern Ireland stand out as it needs to.

Mr Bell: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will Tourism Ireland look directly at marketing Ulster-Scots heritage and culture, particularly over the next couple of weeks during which the Orange festivals will be bringing hundreds of thousands of tourists into Northern Ireland? Will Tourism Ireland be specifically targeting the southern states of the United States of America, where there is significant Ulster-Scots ancestry, through direct promotion and online promotion? I ask that as a junior silver surfer.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: Everybody wants to be a silver surfer today.

In relation to the Ulster-Scot campaign or, as it is sometimes known in North America, Irish Scots, Tourism Ireland has carried out direct mailing to people with Scots-Irish names. It found that to be very successful and hopes to build on that in its North American campaigns. Tourism Ireland has a strapline for the Giant's Causeway:

"Some People Call This the Eighth Wonder of the World. Your Ancestors Called it Home".

That is a very nice way of getting people interested in Northern Ireland from a historical context.

Also in relation to the historical context, at the NSMC we had a discussion on the 1911 census, the diaspora and trying to get more people to look at their genealogical roots in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. I hope that people will take that up. Television programmes such as 'Who Do You think You Are?' will encourage people to look into their background, and we hope that tourism in Northern Ireland will benefit from that.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her statement. However, she has perhaps been listening to too much television coverage of the US Open in that she pronounced Mr Graeme McDowell's name as "Mr McDow-ell". On the north coast, it is pronounced "McDo'ell".

I take her point that golf and other sports could add tremendously to the tourism product of Northern Ireland. Therefore, would the Minister work with her colleague the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that the road signage into Portrush indicates clearly that it is the home of US Open champion Graeme McDowell?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Perhaps that is a question for the Minister for Regional Development, who is sitting opposite. I very much welcome the Member's correction. Obviously, those of us from west of the Bann need correction from time to time on Ulster-Scots pronunciation.

Whether he was a McDow-ell or a McDo'ell, last week I was incredibly proud of him when I was in the United States of America. It was almost a precursor to my arrival in California in that the Northern Ireland Minister for tourism arrived just as Graeme McDowell won the US Open. It was a tremendous occasion for us. I wrote to him — obviously, pronunciation does not come into it when writing to someone, so I am happy enough about that — to tell him that we are so proud of him and because he has put Portrush and north Antrim on the map. I met representatives of Royal Portrush Golf Club before his tremendous victory, and I hope to meet them again to see whether there is more that we can do about golf tourism.

Mr Shannon: Maybe some golf lessons.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment: Maybe some golf lessons. We

continue to discuss signage. We also continue to discuss the need for golf resorts and golf courses. I recently met my colleague the Minister of the Environment about that because, if we are putting Northern Ireland onto the world golf stage, we need to have the product and to be able to attract those who wish to come and visit the home of the winner of the US Open.

Dr McDonnell: As the Minister is on the issue of Graeme McDowell and golf, would it be possible to extend DETI's budget to include golf lessons for the Minister so that the next time she goes to the States we could pass her off as Graeme McDowell's cousin? That would be a major marketing ploy.

I compliment the Minister because whatever she is doing, she is doing it right. I switched on RTÉ the other day, and a panel of hoteliers and tourism people were screaming blue murder that Tourism Ireland was putting all its efforts into supporting the North and doing nothing for Munster. So, obviously something is working.

On a serious note, does the Minister agree that any serious or significant growth in our tourism depends on decent gateways? New gateways really mean airlines and new air routes. The Continental Airlines route that we have to Newark and New Jersey has been extremely successful and was well worth the investment that DETI made some years ago. Can we do a deal with someone to perhaps establish a route into Toronto? If we could get it as far as even Nova Scotia, that would be three quarters of the way, and then we could get connections from Nova Scotia. There are strong Titanic connections in Nova Scotia that we could work on.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to ask his question.

Dr McDonnell: If we cannot at least get one route to Canada established, could we look at one to Atlanta, the Deep South and the Scots-Irish areas or however we choose to describe them? Ulster Scots is only at home; in the US, they are Scots-Irish. There are a number of opportunities, and we can talk all we like, but, at the end of the day, unless there is an airline —

Mr Speaker: I must encourage the Member to get to his question.

Dr McDonnell: Unless there is a flight, they will not be able to come.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: The Member is absolutely correct about that. First, I welcome his support for an increase in DETI's budget. I will be collecting Members' views on that in the near future.

We have been in contact with Belfast International Airport and Belfast City Airport about increasing the number of direct flights into Northern Ireland. The Member is absolutely right: it really adds a string to our bow that, when I go to New York, I can talk about the direct connectivity into Northern Ireland through the Newark flight. That has been a tremendous route and a great success for Continental Airlines.

When I was at the Tourism Ireland reception in San Francisco, we were again talking about connectivity, and we noted that there are no flights into the island of Ireland from the west coast of America. That is a real disappointment. People have to go to Chicago and link in to Dublin, or go to New York and then link in to Northern Ireland or link in through London Heathrow. However, we are at an advanced stage of speaking to a Canadian airline about trying to get a flight back into Belfast; it was really disappointing when those two airlines pulled out of Belfast International.

If flights to Canada were reinstated, we would reap the benefit from the increase in tourist numbers. That would, of course, enable people to travel from Northern Ireland to Canada, and we would benefit from tourists making the journey in the opposite direction.

12.30 pm

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her statement. I suspect that she has answered most of my question through her thorough responses to Members. The Minister is aware of the importance of tourism to the constituency of North Antrim. What has Tourism Ireland done specifically to promote Northern Ireland and all that North Antrim has to offer? What has it done to promote North Antrim's links to the west of Scotland?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment: In the North Antrim constituency, the Member is fortunate to have the Giant's Causeway, which is the principal tourist attraction in Northern Ireland. The Giant's Causeway remains a key selling point for Tourism Ireland when it promotes Northern Ireland.

As I said when talking about golf tourism, we now have a window of opportunity. I will not attempt to pronounce his surname; I will call him Graeme from now on, rather than offend him through mispronunciation. His success provides a small window of opportunity for selling golf tourism in Northern Ireland. Golf is an important part of what North Antrim has to offer.

Golf also features in my answer to the Member's final point on links with the west of Scotland. The Scottish tourism proposition focuses on golf. We could benefit by creating connectivity between the golf markets in North Antrim and Scotland.

Executive Committee Business

Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill: Final Stage

**The Minister for Regional Development
(Mr Murphy):** I beg to move

*That the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA
6/09] do now pass.*

I do not intend to address the provisions in detail. Instead, I draw attention to the main purposes of the Bill, which are to introduce arrangements for a permit scheme to control certain works on roads and the authorisation by local councils of certain special events on roads.

The Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 18 January 2010 and completed its Committee Stage on 26 May 2010. I am glad to say that I was able to accept and take forward two suggested amendments at Consideration Stage.

I take the opportunity to thank the Chairperson and members of the Committee for Regional Development for their scrutiny of the Bill and for helping to ensure its smooth passage. In addition, I thank Members for their positive contributions to debates on the Bill through its Assembly stages. I commend the Bill to the House.

**The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee
for Regional Development (Miss McIlveen):** I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Final Stage of the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

I wish to express the Committee's thanks to the witnesses who provided evidence to the Committee and to the Minister and the Department's Bill team for their co-operation and assistance during the passage of the Bill, particularly at Committee Stage. The Committee also wishes to thank the team from the Assembly Bill Office and the Committee staff for their work in producing the Bill report of Committee Stage. I also thank other Committee members for the effort and commitment that they brought to the pre-legislative stage and to Committee Stage.

The issue before us is whether the Assembly is content to endorse the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. As Members are aware from previous debates, the main provisions are for

permit schemes to control certain works on roads and the prohibition or restriction of the use of roads in connection with special events. There are two minor elements to the Bill on the holding of inquiries under the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and on giving effect to the reform of the Lord Chancellor's Office.

The Committee welcomed the opportunity to take forward the Committee Stage. During clause-by-clause scrutiny, the Committee considered the evidence received and agreed all the clauses. The Committee suggested, and the Minister agreed to, amendments to clause 3 and schedule 1. The amendment to clause 3 sought to ensure that a resolution of the Assembly would be needed to approve regulations that introduce new criminal offences or increase the penalty for an existing offence in relation to permit schemes for carrying out certain works on roads. I welcome the fact that that amendment was made to the Bill.

The second amendment to the Bill relates, as I said, to schedule 1. In the Bill as introduced, schedule 1 referred to the closure of roads for special events. The Committee was pleased that the making of a film was included in the arrangements for road closures for special events. However, having considered submissions on behalf of the film industry in Northern Ireland, the Committee sought clear confirmation that the term "filming" would include the making of television programmes and commercials. I welcome the fact that the amendment to the Bill does that.

During the Committee's deliberations on the Bill, a number of main areas of concern were raised. Those are detailed in the report, and include the cost of issuing permits for works on roads; the need for co-operation and co-ordination when planning works on roads; the need for a notice period before works on roads commence; compensation for promoters in the event of emergency works; the impact of works on peak-time traffic flows; the impact of permit schemes on the extension of the gas and other utility networks; the delegated powers of the Bill; the definition of the term "film"; and the definition of special events.

Amendments were sought and made to the Bill in relation to its delegated powers and to the definition of the term "film". In addition to those amendments, the Committee made recommendations about co-operation and co-

ordination of planned works on roads, and a review of the permit scheme after three years in order to ascertain whether the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 will require amendment to address the concerns of the Committee and those who gave evidence.

The first recommendation relating to planned works on roads arose from concerns raised by Committee members and a number of stakeholder organisations, as I mentioned. Those concerns centred around the need for those planning to carry out works on roads, particularly utility companies, to co-operate with one another in an attempt to co-ordinate works, thus reducing disruption to road users and the overall costs incurred, and avoiding the weakening of the roads structure that can arise as a result of multiple road openings.

The Committee accepts that a duty is included in the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 for those planning to carry out works on roads to co-ordinate, but members were of the view that more needs to be done to improve that situation. Concerns about road openings by utility companies have been rehearsed on numerous occasions. The Public Accounts Committee reported on the issue in February 2009, and that report made recommendations for improvement.

In its report, the Regional Development Committee recommended that progress to date on the implementation of the findings of the Public Accounts Committee report should inform the development of the Department for Regional Development's guidance on the permit scheme, and should form the basis of ongoing monitoring of the operation of the permit scheme.

The second recommendation of the report relates to the need to review the permit scheme. The Committee would not wish to see the scheme introduced without a clear undertaking to periodically review its effectiveness. For that reason, the Committee has recommended that the first review of the scheme take place three years after its coming into operation. The review, as recommended by the Committee, should aim to ascertain whether the Street Works (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 requires amendment.

The Committee will periodically monitor the outworkings of the permit scheme and will work with the Department to ensure that any issues or concerns that may arise are addressed. I

am happy to advise that the Committee for Regional Development commends the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill to the House, and recommends that it now pass.

Mr Leonard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As Members and many others will be aware, roadworks can cause a lot of public conversation and give rise to many phone calls. The thrust of the Bill is appropriate, and the permit scheme is a worthwhile addition to the system. Reviewing the scheme to see whether it improves the situation is important. We now have the enabling legislation, but the practicalities of that and how it will be rolled out will also be important.

As the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee pointed out, the review scheme has been recommended. The core concept of the Bill is acceptable. As I have previously stated, it represents common sense, and we will see how it rolls out. The provision for the Assembly to approve new criminal offences was the application of common sense, and I think it appropriate that that was included, as was the amendment on the definition of the term "film". That once again shows the advantage of the Committee structure in which stakeholders can bring forward their concerns and work can be done at that level.

The Bill is a common-sense bit of work. We will see how it is implemented and how the reviews take their course, and then see whether any of the provisions need to be revisited. We support the Bill.

Mr Kinahan: The Ulster Unionist Party supports the Bill and looks forward to seeing it rolled out.

The Minister for Regional Development: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and the other Members who spoke in support of the Bill. The comments from the Deputy Chairperson will certainly be taken on board. I look forward to continued engagement with the Committee and Members as my officials and I consult on proposals for the implementation of the permit scheme provisions in the Bill. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Roads (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [NIA 6/09] do now pass.

Assembly Business

Appointment to the Assembly Commission

Mr Speaker: The next matter on the Order Paper is a motion to appoint a Member to fill the vacancy on the Assembly Commission. As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That, in accordance with Standing Order 79(4), Mr Peter Weir be appointed to fill a vacancy on the Assembly Commission. — [Lord Browne.]

Committee Business

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The next motion is on Statutory Committee membership. As with similar motions, this, too, will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Jonathan Bell replace Mr Trevor Clarke as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; that Mr Paul Frew replace Mr Stephen Moutray as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and that Mr Paul Givan be appointed as a member of the Justice Committee. — [Lord Browne.]

Private Members' Business

Armed Forces and Veterans Bill: First Stage

Mr McNarry: I beg to introduce the Armed Forces and Veterans Bill [NIA 33/09], which is a Bill to provide for the benefit of personnel and veterans of the naval, military or air forces of the Crown and their families.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network Group

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

Mr Craig: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to instigate a review into the performance of the Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network Group, including consideration of its appointment processes, independence, accountability, transparency, operating structures and competency.

The motion calls for the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to conduct a review of the performance and appointments procedure used to establish the regional group set up to promote the aims and needs of those suffering from autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and to oversee the implementation of an action plan published in June 2009.

In 2007, the Minister announced a review of autistic services. He appointed Lord Maginnis of Drumglass to chair that review, which, at the time, was acknowledged as the best way forward to address the unmet rights and needs of those with ASD and their carers. In 2008, an all-party Assembly group on autism was formed, headed by the Member for Newry and Armagh Dominic Bradley, to attempt to inform Members about autism issues. Both groups got to work, but, unfortunately, their conclusions completely differed. Although both agreed on the need for an ASD strategy, they disagreed on the need for legislation, which was to become a running debate and sore in the House.

12.45 pm

The Health Committee held two lengthy and detailed debates. On 17 September 2009, the all-party group chairperson, Dominic Bradley and Arlene Cassidy from Autism NI were present as witnesses. The second discussion was held on 1 October 2009, with four witnesses present: Dr Maura Briscoe from the Health Department; Dr Michael McBride, the Chief Medical Officer; Mr Kieran McShane from the Health and Social Care Board; and Dr Stephen Bergin from the Public Health Agency.

I have read the minutes of the debate, and it would be polite to say that it was healthy and long. In reality, the debate was very heated. Much of it surrounded whether there was a need for legislation, which Lord Maginnis had ruled out, much to the frustration and anger of some. The area of particular focus that is relevant to this debate was to do with the appointment of the Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network Group, which was announced with the strategic plan in June 2009. The group was appointed in April 2009 and was made up of representatives of service users, carers, the general public, voluntary and community organisations and statutory organisations, including the education and library boards, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), health and social care trusts, health boards and the Public Health Agency. Dr Stephen Bergin from the Public Health Agency is the chairperson.

There is also a reference group, which is chaired by Lord Maginnis, who was responsible for the review of autism services and treatment. The reference group is responsible for representing stakeholders' views. Unfortunately, that is where the controversy lies. At the Committee meeting on 1 October 2009, the witnesses were questioned at length on appointments to the reference group and on how it carries out its work. Dr Maura Briscoe from the Department repeatedly referred questions to Lord Maginnis, stating that only he could answer questions about appointments to the group. She also stated that Lord Maginnis had been identified by the Department to assist Dr Stephen Bergin, the chairperson of the regional network group, as an advocate for parents, carers and service users.

Given the current debate about whether legislation should be introduced in respect of autism services, I question that appointment. The individual in question takes a very definite stance on the subject, and that alienates him from a large number of ASD sufferers. It seems that the Department was keen to take a view disagreeable to many carers and organisations that represent those who suffer from, or care for people with, autism. Therefore, one must ask whether there was an ulterior motive to the appointments to the reference group that represents parents, carers and service users. This issue is not about party politics. Some may want to use that ploy to deflect attention from the real issue. It is about how autism sufferers and the groups that represent them can be best

served and represented. Furthermore, it is not about raising up old debates about whether there should be legislation. We are talking about accountability, which is getting to the core of what democracy and transparency are. How best can we serve and represent the people at the heart of the issue?

Appointments to any public body are usually done through a rigorous and detailed process to ensure that the best people for the job are intact and that the board or group represents a diversity of views and opinions. Do the appointments to that board comply with those credentials that are associated with public appointments? That is why the motion calls on the Minister to initiate a review into the practice of the group and the appointments process that was used. How does the reference group interact with all its stakeholders? Is it representative? Is it doing its job? Those are all legitimate questions.

Autism NI claims that a number of freedom of information requests have been refused. Those requests refer to data that are held about the autism review. Autism NI also claims that the parent and carers representatives on the reference group were hand-picked by the chairperson to provide a positive response on behalf of the Department. Those are very serious accusations. In the interests of public transparency, I commend the motion to the House.

Speaking as an individual who has represented ASD groups in the past in a former capacity and who has contact with those who suffer from the condition, I know that people who have children with ASD are concerned that they are not being represented properly by those reviews. It is a genuinely held belief that their views will not be represented properly. That is why we are calling for a review of the process and how it represents the groups and carers who suffer the consequences of the problem.

I know that, medically, ASD is very difficult to quantify. It is not a mental disease, and it is not a physical disease; it lies somewhere in between. As a result, it is very hard to diagnose, and it is extremely difficult to provide treatment for it and to aid the parents. However, the parents are the ones who are left with the legacy and left to deal with the problem. Currently, they feel alienated from the process, so I commend the motion to the House.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for being late and missing the proposer's comments. He may have already covered some of the issues that I will refer to.

Autism is a social and communication disability that is unique for many reasons. Quite often, it is confused with mental impairment, but it is obviously not. In previous debates in the House, we have raised the point that autism is a social and communication disability that is excluded from equality protection under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA). Therefore, it falls short of recognition for benefit assessment unless there is a recognised co-morbid assessment or qualifying condition, such as a learning disability or mental illness.

It is widely recognised that autism has been historically underfunded and under-provided for across the Six Counties. However, it should be noted that Sinn Féin welcomes all positive developments in autism services over recent years. We have had the publication of the action plan by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the associated budgetary allocations to back that up. That is something that we welcome.

Members will have received a briefing paper from PAL, which is the Parents' Autism Lobby. From reading that document, it is clear that parents and carers do not have any faith in the newly established Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network Group. The group feels that the model may appear to be more suited to consultation than action. It says that it is difficult to see how the model can result in a cohesive plan. It raises other points about the size and nature of the newly established network. Many parents have described it as a moveable feast, with the goalposts constantly changing and many targets that were set out in the original document not being met. Parents participating with the network are already reporting consultation fatigue and feel that they are not seeing the outcomes that they wish.

Another issue of concern is the tie-in from other Departments in the network. If the Minister reads the transcript of this debate, perhaps he will give us more details on the level of cross-departmental work taking place. For example, what level of staff is involved from each Department, and what is their commitment in working hours?

Sinn Féin has always made it clear that it recognises the need for a cross-departmental holistic approach to autism. In order to plan for the future and for support, we need a strategic plan, which is an essential part of moving forward. It is recognised that that is inherently difficult, as ASD is a lifelong condition that needs appropriate responses at various life stages and settings.

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

There is a lot of disparity between the parents' and carers' groups and the Department on the issue. We want to get it right, and we want parents and carers to be at the heart of these decisions. It is widely recognised that, for many years, the Department let down people with autism, and those support groups were the backbone for each other in providing much-needed support. Sinn Féin will support the motion, as it believes that any review and improvements that can be taken forward should be welcomed.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: I declare an interest in that my grandson is severely autistic, and I am the chairperson of the board of governors of a special school in which many autistic children are being taught and helped.

I am disappointed that the debate is taking place today. First, it has been brought to my attention that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made it known to the Business Committee some time ago that he would not be available to respond to any debate today as he had prearranged business. However, the DUP insisted on bringing the motion to the Floor of the House regardless.

Secondly, this is an unnecessary and counter-productive motion. The facts are plain and simple: this Minister of Health has done and is doing more to develop services for people and families affected by autism than any Minister in this or the previous Assembly. The Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network Group plays a key role in the Minister's strategy to develop services for people affected by autism. It is delivering on the ground and, therefore, the motion has questionable intentions.

No one in the Chamber would suggest that there is not a need to improve services for people affected by autism in Northern Ireland. Therefore, on coming into office, the Minister of Health initiated an independent review of

ASD services chaired by Lord Maginnis. As an outcome of the review, the Minister launched an ASD action plan to drive improvements in the service for the benefit of all those affected. The Minister has invested £1.5 million in autism services to date, and I have been informed that further investment is on the way. That is delivering.

A major achievement in the action plan was the establishment of the regional ASD network group. The aim of that multidisciplinary, multi-agency regional group is to provide a regional perspective on the development of autism services and to oversee the action plan. The need to understand the different complexities across Northern Ireland is crucial to successful solutions, and I congratulate the group on its work to date.

The regional ASD network group is chaired by Dr Stephen Bergin, a psychiatrist with multiple medical degrees, who has vast experience in the field of autism. I find the motion extremely discourteous to Dr Bergin and his team. It illustrates an arrogance from the Benches that puts political point-scoring ahead of professional integrity, delivery and the people whom they claim to represent.

1.00 pm

The work of the network group has been open and transparent, and one of its aims has been to communicate with service users such as parents, carers and the voluntary sector; and I can verify that through my own family experience. To facilitate that aim, the group held a series of meetings across Northern Ireland, and the regional ASD network has been supported by the regional ASD reference group, chaired by Lord Maginnis, to provide valuable experience and advice from parents, carers and individuals affected by ASD, as well as voluntary and community sector representatives. The group is open and transparent and has the interest of people affected by autism at its heart.

I fear that the motion is more about personal attacks, rather than any desire to improve the services for people with autism. That is a great disappointment.

The group is doing a marvellous job to help parents, children and teachers. I see that when I look at my grandson and the children in the school of which I am chairman of the board of governors. I see the work that is being done

with those children and their families to ease their suffering. However, we must remember that it will take time for that work to reach right across Northern Ireland.

Cross-departmental working was mentioned during the debate today, and the Minister for Employment and Learning has ensured that young teachers are now compelled to complete a module in autism communication. From that point of view, I am disappointed that the motion has been brought to the Floor of the House today.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to address some of the issues raised during the debate today, rather than some of the personalities who raised those issues.

In 2007, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety appointed the chairperson of the independent review of autism services, who, in turn, appointed a review steering group. At that time, the chairperson recorded his determination for the review to be completed speedily so that money would be provided quickly to new services rather than being spent on administration, and many welcomed that approach.

The members of that steering group were mainly drawn from the public health sector in Northern Ireland, England and the South of Ireland, and the terms of reference of the review included the requirement to investigate the role of legislation in providing for autism services. However, the final report of the review group, which was issued in May 2008, unfortunately contained no analysis of the usefulness of legislation but simply stated that it was not required.

A number of other issues arose from the report. The first is whether the chairperson of the review should not have been appointed through the public appointment process, based on transparent and agreed criteria. As that was not the case, we must also ask whether the review can be defined as independent, given that all the review group members were vetted by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and that a senior departmental official was installed for support. Many people also want to know why the review group was not more inclusive of the voluntary and education sectors in the North of Ireland, and why no members were from the social care

sector. ASD is a lifelong condition and does involve diagnosis and diagnosis alone. I also want to know why the review group did not adhere to the terms of reference and why it did not produce an analysis regarding legislation. It came to the conclusion that legislation was not required. In fact, some members of the review group, including the chairperson, began from the premise that legislation was not required. One got the impression that nothing would convince him to the contrary.

Can the review group be considered independent? It appears not to be, since it is exempt from acceding to FOI requests. Many people wonder whether the process was the quickest way to effect change, given that it began in 2007 and that we are now in 2010 without major change having taken place.

In September 2008, the Department launched its consultation on the action plan for autism, and it ended in December 2008 with over 400 responses. In June 2009, the Minister launched the implementation action plan for autism and appointed a project manager. A budget of £2.2 million was promised over three years. There are many issues —

Mr P Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Yes, I will.

Mr P Ramsey: Given that the debate is on the important subject of vulnerable young people and adults, it is vital that all-party support on autism emerge from the Chamber.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I could not agree with him more.

My time is running out, so I cannot address all the issues, but suffice it to say that there clearly seems to be a breakdown in communication between the review group and the voluntary sector. The Minister must take heed of the points that are being raised on all sides of the House and address the issue. As my colleague said, it is imperative that we all speak with one voice. That clearly is not the current state of affairs.

In conclusion, I appeal to the Minister to listen to what has been said in the debate and to address the issues that have been raised. If he does that, we will be able to have a unified approach that will benefit the people who matter

most — the children and adults who live with the condition of autism throughout their lives.

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party is totally committed to providing only the best services to the people in the community who are affected by autistic spectrum disorder. I serve as a member on the all-party Assembly group on autism, which is based at Stormont under the chairmanship of Dominic Bradley. I am also committed to the introduction of an autism Bill for Northern Ireland. People who have been listening to the debate could be forgiven for being confused, because many groups, networks, and so on, appear to have been established. I have no doubt that all of them are trying to improve the lot for people who are affected by autism, but it seems that those groups are scattered. If something more central existed, we might reach an earlier and better conclusion.

The motion calls on the Health Minister to review the performance of the RASD network. It is unfortunate that the Minister is not present to give the Assembly an indication of the progress or otherwise of the work of that network.

As I understand, Minister McGimpsey set up the RASD network to improve services for people of all ages who are affected by autism. The network is multidisciplinary and multiagency, and it provides a regional perspective to the development of autism services and will oversee the implementation of the Minister's action plan for 2008-09 to 2010-11. Membership of the network comprises service users, carers, the Public Health Agency, education and library boards and health trusts. As has been said, the chairman of the network, Dr Bergin, stressed the need for partnership working in all areas, and, to that end, yet another reference group, which was chaired by Lord Maginnis, was set up to engage with stakeholders, to represent the views of the carers and service users and to advise the network.

We all support the network's aims, which include: redesign to improve autism care; performance improvement; training and awareness; communication and information; and effective engagement of partnership working. At this juncture, we must ask how successful or otherwise the RASD network has been to date. Again, had the Minister been in attendance today, that question might have been answered.

It is estimated that around 16,000 people in Northern Ireland are affected by autism, and, for whatever reason, we continue to have up to 200 new cases every year. We all know families in our constituencies who have to face the future with a loved one who is affected by autism. It is incumbent on us all as Assembly Members and legislators to play our part to, if possible, find the cause of autism and to provide good services for everyone to ensure that their lives are as fulfilling as possible and to give good support to families and carers.

I look forward to the day when Northern Ireland has an autism Act through which everyone enjoys their entitlement and does not have to shout and fight for this, that and the other. Through legislation, that can be granted. If supporting the motion brings forward better facilities in the near future for everyone living with autism, I can go along with that.

Mr Easton: I support the motion, which calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to instigate a review into the performance of the Regional Autism Spectrum Disorder Network Group, including consideration of its appointments process, independence, accountability, transparency, operating structures and competency.

Autism is a disorder of neural development that is characterised by impaired social interaction and communication and by restrictive and repetitive behaviour. Autism is a member of the autism spectrum along with Asperger's syndrome and pervasive development disorder not otherwise specified. The regional ASD network group was established as part of the ASD strategy action plans for 2008-2011. Membership of the group and subgroups is made up of representatives from service users, carers, general public volunteers, community organisations and statutory organisations, including the education and library boards, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, health and social care trusts, health and social care boards and the Public Health Agency.

There is also a reference group, which is chaired by Lord Maginnis, that is tasked with engaging with parents, carers and service users to ensure that their feedback on development services is captured. The Health Minister officially launched the reference group on 10 March 2010. It is unclear how the group was constructed, what

it is doing, what it has achieved and how it is run and for what purpose. Those groups were set up as a response to the needs of people who suffer from ASD and their carers after a review, which was chaired by Lord Maginnis, was conducted into autism services.

The ASD action plan is organised around several themes: service redesign to improve ASD care; performance improvement; training and raising awareness; communication and information; and effective engagement and partnership working. Groups that represent ASD sufferers and carers have lobbied for a long time for better care and treatment, because ASD is not necessarily a mental or physical condition, and it can be hard to diagnose. The action plan was to form part of the strategy to combat the problems that sufferers have been experiencing, especially discrimination. There has been much debate about the Minister of Health's response. It seems that proposals put forward by the all-party Assembly group on autism, which recommended legislation in conjunction with a cross-departmental strategy, have been largely ignored. We should not put the care and treatment of those suffering from ASD at risk. We should provide the best possible treatment and care.

1.15 pm

I am concerned about the make-up of the regional group, and that is why I support the motion. All government appointments should be accountable and the process transparent to ensure that fairness and equality are adhered to, as well as ensuring that we get the best people for the job. I commend the motion to the House and urge Members to support it.

Mrs McGill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to make some brief comments on the following points: the bringing forward of the motion; the difficulties that are experienced by the autistic community; the reference group; the real issue, which was raised by Jonathan Craig; the £2 million of funding, which has been referred to; what is happening in the west; and the experience of the parent of an autistic child, to whom I spoke at the weekend.

With respect to Rev Coulter, I understand why he is disappointed that the motion has been brought forward. However, I do not see anything to fear from it, because it merely calls for the review of a body that has been set up under the auspices of the Department of Health. I do not

sit on the all-party Assembly group on autism, but I am a member of the Health Committee. However, having listened to the parent who spoke to me at the weekend and to others, it appears that difficulties remain. In my view, not only do difficulties remain, but tensions are obvious.

With reference to accountability, we received a briefing note from the Parents' Autism Lobby — I am not saying whether it is accurate or not — that outlines the situation that some groups find themselves in, and that is why it is important that we look at it. That is my view, and it has been expressed by the Deputy Chairperson and by others in their contributions. The note stated that the chairperson of RASDNG invited voluntary sector parent representative groups to submit proposals for the structure of RASDNG and recruitment of its membership, but that that was thrown out, without explanation, by Lord Maginnis. That may not be accurate, but if that is the feeling of some of the groups that lobby on this very serious and sensitive issue, it needs to be looked at.

With reference to what Rev Coulter said, a review or some way of looking at the issue would be valuable because, as Jonathan Craig said —

Mr McCallister: Does the Member agree that one of the best places for that group to talk about needs and to challenge it about its work would be the Health Committee?

Mrs McGill: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I hear two party colleagues to my right saying that there would be no difficulty with that. One of those colleagues is the Deputy Chairperson of the Health Committee, and we accept that point.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs McGill: No; I know that you are my party colleague, but I have a few points that I want to make. I will let you speak if there is time at the end.

Jonathan Craig commented on the real issue. I want to refer to a parent who spoke with me at the weekend. I have quoted her previously in the Chamber and in the Health Committee. She is exceptionally active and informed on a range of issues, and she is very keen that her child should develop and progress to their full potential.

Certainly, however, there were gaps in her awareness of what is in place as regards advice, support, meetings and legislation. I did my best to inform her. Therefore, I am thinking in particular about that parent and that family, who have experienced difficulties and barriers, and, indeed, the child who must also face such barriers. If gaps in awareness exist, we must seek to address them.

I want to make a couple of points about funding. Other Members mentioned the fact that there is funding and a range of resource provision to deal with autism. I believe that it is £2.02 million. The question has been asked whether that money has gone into the system and been spent and, indeed, where it currently sits. I believe that the new commissioning structures can address those issues.

I will conclude by saying that there were positive aspects to what that parent said, particularly on the situation in the west and the Western Education and Library Board. Again, that has been my experience. Positive steps have been taken to engage with carers, parents and the young people who have autism.

Mr Shannon: I could not have timed my arrival to the Chamber better, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support the motion. The reasons behind it must be made clear at the outset. Children with autism are not receiving the care that they need. I will not take the opportunity to browbeat the Minister. I will try to make constructive comments; that is the best way. People with autism need special attention, and it is important that we consider their needs. This morning, one newspaper stated that there will be some £400,000 of cutbacks in that area during the next financial year. The Assembly cannot let that go by without comment.

I am an elected representative, and I base my comments on what I have been told by the people, the mothers and the children, whom I represent. I am familiar with the care of one autistic boy. His parents do everything for him: they wash and dress him; they cook for and feed him; they bathe him and take him to the toilet; and they amuse, hug, kiss and love him. They do all those things. He depends on his parents for his every need. When he is at school, they wash, iron, clean and shop. They try to find time to work to pay the bills as well as looking after their child. They love their son with all that they have. Sadly, however, love is not enough to get

their family through the sheer exhaustion and the emotional and mental strain.

It is up to the community and to Members, as elected representatives, to step up to the plate and to help that boy and his parents. We can do so by supporting them and offering them the best help that society can provide to ensure that they do not reach the point of no return. Many parents have reached that point, which concerns me.

Earlier, I mentioned the budget. In the past, it was £660,000 a year, but it will be cut to some £250,000 a year. For 300 children in Northern Ireland, those figures simply do not add up. There are now too many ways to demonstrate how families that have a child with autism are being let down. One glaring example is that of respite care for families because, under the current system, there are simply not enough places available. It is estimated that one in every 100 children has some degree of autism.

The meanin' o' thon bes at mair nor yin ootae ivry 100 parents hes the added hannlin o' leukin efter a wean at bes needfu' o' mair care an' attention. Adae wi' hoo bad the disablement bes, thon care can bae oniething fae hefts wi' a wheen o' extra hours o' hamewaark tae haein' tae dae ivrything fer the wean fer the hale o' his ir hir lif', at bes apt tae bae es lang an' es healthtfu' es onie ither boadie's term o' lif'.

That means that more than one in every 100 parents has the additional stress of caring for a child who needs extra care and attention. Depending on the severity of a child's disability, that care can range from having to help with a few extra hours of homework to having to do everything for the child for his or her entire lifespan, which is likely to be as long and as healthy as that of anyone else.

I know one family that has an autistic son and two young daughters. The mother gave up her job to care for her son as best she could. She applied for respite care to enable her to take a break and spend time with her other children. She was put on an emergency waiting list, yet, goodness me, it is now two years later, and she has still not had a weekend off. That is probably replicated for hundred and hundreds of people across the Province. For three hours a week, a trained professional provides care for the woman's son to allow her to spend time with her daughters. However, that is the sum total of the

relief that she gets, and she must pay for that herself.

Mr McCallister: Does the Member agree that part of what the reference group is doing is looking at the postcode lottery? Mrs McGill spoke about problems in the Western Trust. The focus must be on how to best level out those resources to make sure that we use them and that everyone gets their fair shout.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Member for that intervention. I wholeheartedly agree with his constructive comments. We must look at the situation that we are now in and try to budget to ensure that people get the help that they need.

The lady sought help from Home-Start and other groups, but, at the end of the day, some of those volunteers are not trained to deal with her troubled son. All those problems have an impact, too. Autism is a severely misunderstood condition. Only trained professionals with patience and understanding know how to deal with autistic children. That is the crux of the matter. Because of the unpredictable nature of the disability, even those who are trained can find the work a strain.

The Minister has made provision for a long-term plan in the form of the Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network Group, and John McCallister referred to that. But what has changed? There has been a cut in funding. I see other Departments trying to play their part. For example, DRD allowed for the cut in the price of a SmartPass for children with learning difficulties. That is one example of what can be done. DFP offers a rates reduction for those with disabilities. At the same time, through the group, we need to make the changes that are necessary and that can make a difference.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. The number of children with autism is rising. We sense the effect that that is having on society and on individuals. The families are not asking for much; they are asking for no more than they are entitled to. That is the key. We are being asked to give those families only what they need and what we can provide, which is support.

I support the motion, and I congratulate the Members who brought it to the Chamber. I ask the Minister to give us the opportunity to support those who need help.

Mr McCallister: I declare an interest as a member of the Assembly's all-party group on autism. I pay tribute to Lord Maginnis for the work that he has done. As other Members have said, this is a complex area. We in Northern Ireland are fortunate to have had someone like Lord Maginnis, who has a personal interest in the matter as well, and the assistance of the team that my colleague Rev Coulter mentioned, to address the complicated issues that we all want to see being addressed.

Mr D Bradley: The Member said that Lord Maginnis has a very personal interest in autism, and I do not disagree with him on that. However, does the Member consider that having a very personal interest is enough of a qualification to lead such a high-powered review as Lord Maginnis was charged with leading?

Mr McCallister: I mentioned that Lord Maginnis had a personal interest in autism, but that was not the only qualification that led to his getting appointed to head the review. He has long been an advocate for better services, and he has deeply held and passionate views about the issue. The Member accompanied Lord Maginnis and me on a trip to the USA to look at the issues around autism and autism legislation there. Lord Maginnis has a background of many years of interest far beyond the personal interest. He has a huge interest in the issue, and a huge passion for it.

We must also take into account the fact that, when someone chairs a review, they bring together a group of superbly qualified people. We are fortunate to have an internationally recognised group of this calibre to lead on autism for us. The group is tightly focused, which is all to the good.

1.30 pm

Mr McCarthy said that the group was a multidisciplinary and multi-agency team and that that was what was needed. I agree with him. That is what is needed, and that is what we have. We should be working towards that and ensuring that the strategy is delivered. We do not want to have a postcode lottery and a system in which something works well in one trust area but not as well in the Western Trust, for instance. That is what the group is and should be about.

Mr Craig: I do not dispute what has been said about the expertise of the group. The chairman

has had a long interest in the subject. Does the Member agree that core to all that are the people who suffer from ASD, their parents and carers? Given some of the strong views held by the chairman and some of those in the group, a lack of trust has, unfortunately, developed between them. That raises the question about whether they were the right people to carry this matter forward, because the whole thing will fail if there is no interface between the carers and the sufferers.

Mr McCallister: The chairman of the group, Lord Maginnis, has robust views. He is not afraid to talk to anyone and will not shy away from talking to Mr Craig or any other Member of the House in sharing those views and his passion on this issue that we want to move forward. The difference lies in getting a tightly focused group to lead on the issue. Members of the Assembly and members of the Health Committee can bring the group to Parliament Buildings at any time to review its work and to hear what progress it has made. That is how this should be conducted. It should not be a review of a review.

In his intervention, Mr Craig talked about the experts. Does he accept that they are experts? Is he making a personal attack on Lord Maginnis? Does he believe, as I do, that Lord Maginnis is eminently qualified to chair the group? If the Member wants to get up to say that he supports Lord Maginnis and his work, I will be happy to give way.

Would anyone have thought three years ago that we would have made as much progress as we have in getting a strategy in place and in getting funding, for instance? I take issue with Mr Shannon's comments. If he asks an Assembly question, he will find out that autism funding has not been cut — even in the very tight financial constraints under which we find ourselves. I recognise the expertise of the group.

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

Mr McCallister: We should not throw away this excellent opportunity to support the group in what it does. We should keep it under scrutiny at the Health Committee and make sure that it is delivering, but we should take advantage of having an internationally recognised group.

Mrs M Bradley: The motion is important, but it should not be used as a vehicle for further examination of the need for legislation, and it

should not be used for political point scoring. Parents of autistic children lead a stressful life. A physical disability is obvious to all, but the autistic child brings many more challenges, because his or her symptoms are not as outwardly obvious. The child carries a silent inability to make measured decisions and often finds it hard to communicate with others at the most basic levels. That can often lead to misunderstanding. It is bound to create a worry for parents that will span their entire lives. Those parents need representation, legislation and support from all bodies, including the Assembly.

Autism is not classified in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Therefore, bringing pressure to bear where we can to secure the appropriate legislation that will offer some protection and rights to parents, children and young adults should be a major priority for the House. Whatever happens in the House today, I sincerely hope that there can be formal agreement that this issue needs to be got right, and that the concerns of the Parents' Autism Lobby are listened to and given due consideration.

I want to make my opinion clear: the words used here today need to be measured and considered in securing a review of the Regional Autism Spectrum Disorder Network Group, especially those aspects that are causing concern. I am keen not to withdraw any benefit that that group has achieved to date, and I commend it for that work. However, there must be co-operation, clear and concise pathways to achievement and due consideration between all Departments whose remit it is to provide for autism. It is important to remember that there is a cross-departmental responsibility for the delivery of autism services. That responsibility does not lie solely at the door of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Clearly, there has been a breakdown in communication between the RASDN group and major elements in the voluntary sector. Personalities seem to have got in the way of progress, to the disadvantage of those with autism. That cannot be said to be helpful by any means. I regret that the Health Minister is not here to listen to the points that have been made and to respond to them by beginning a review of the work of the RASDN group. Again, however, we need to remember that one Minister is not solely responsible.

Mr I McCrea: First, I thank everyone who spoke in the debate. It is obvious that, no matter about the differing viewpoints, there is unanimity of concern about autism issues.

I intend to raise a few issues, after which I will mention some of the points that were raised by Members. As my colleague the Member for Lagan Valley Jonathan Craig said when proposing the motion, the issue is not about party politics, but about transparency, accountability and, most importantly, the people at the heart of the debate: those who suffer from autism.

There are approximately 20,000 people with autism in Northern Ireland. The disorder is not represented in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995's definition of a disability. It has been said that further legislation could affect and change that situation. Many autism sufferers do not receive the support that they need, which means that many children and adults with autism are unable to reach their full potential. By support I mean the parents, carers and service users who are central to the issues of care and treatment and who experience the services that they require to have their needs met.

If there is nothing to hide, what should be done is exactly what the motion demands: to initiate a review of the set-up and performance of the Regional Autism Spectrum Disorder Network Group. As my colleague said when proposing the motion, all public appointments are made through a rigorous and transparent process. Were the appointments to the group made using the same rigorous process required for any other public appointment? Is the group representative of carers, service users, parents and charities that represent ASD sufferers, as many believe it is supposed to be? Those are key questions that need to be answered in order to build confidence in how the group fulfils its aims and objectives.

The parents' autism lobby participated in the early development of the Regional Autism Spectrum Disorder Network Group and co-operated with the Health Department in the preparation of a proposal to facilitate the selection of parent and user members for the RASDN group by an independent body, NICVA. PAL presented all political parties with comprehensive documentation to support its allegation that the proposal was accepted by the project manager, Dr Stephen Bergin, but that

that decision and all the work that was done over the summer of 2009 was not accepted.

The RASDN group was set up in accordance with the action plan that was published by the Department in June 2009. It focuses on lifting the barriers that ASD sufferers and their carers encounter. Other Members also referred to those barriers. Concerns about that group and its performance are, therefore, central to helping sufferers and their carers. The Assembly is responsible for holding the Government and Ministers to account to ensure that they take correct decisions that make a difference, rather than brushing issues under the carpet.

The motion is not intended to give rise to old debates about legislation for autism, although that issue raised its head once or twice. The motion aims to ensure that the decision taken to set up those groups and the implementation of the action plan are producing results. The Assembly, as reflected through the all-party group that was set up to look into the issues facing people with ASD, is committed to delivering for sufferers and their carers.

Once again, I raise the issue of transparency and the difficulties that PAL faces in securing information through freedom of information requests. Why is that information being withheld when it is of interest to the public and stakeholders? Is there something to hide? I do not suggest for one second that there is, but if there is nothing to hide, any such requests should be granted. I urge the Minister and the group to speak to PAL and to involve it in paving the way forward for a better system and service for ASD sufferers and their families.

As there were no contentious issues or expressions of opposition to the motion, I will not deal in too much detail with the contributions of other Members. Michelle O'Neill suggested that parents have no faith in the group and do not see the outcomes of its consultations. She stressed the importance of carers being at the heart of decisions.

Dr Coulter expressed his disappointment at what he felt was an unnecessary and counterproductive motion. I do not necessarily agree with him. It has been a good debate, and those who participated had the opportunity to express their concerns. Those concerns may not always reflect what the Member wants to hear, but the debate provides a good opportunity for other Members to raise issues. The aim was not

to attack the Minister or any individual Member, but to encourage co-operation with the group. That is important, and if that is the message that emerges from the debate, it is something on which we can all agree.

Dominic Bradley was one of a few Members to refer to the transparency of the public appointment. He took the opportunity to refer to legislation, on which the debate is ongoing. He reiterated the need for everyone to speak with one voice today.

Kieran McCarthy asked how successful the RASDN group was, and he spoke about the need for that information to be made available. He looked forward to an autism Act being introduced in Northern Ireland to deal with all the issues.

Claire McGill suggested that Members from the Minister's party should not have anything to fear. That is an important point, because the motion requests only transparency and a review, and there should be nothing to fear from that. The Hansard report will reflect the comments that she made about a particular constituent.

Jim Shannon referred to the financial cutbacks. He emphasised the importance of keeping the focus on autism and ensuring that no funding is removed from that area. He also spoke about a family in his constituency and said that the Assembly must step up to the plate.

1.45 pm

John McCallister referred to Lord Maginnis's passion for and background in helping those with autism, which has been a personal interest of his for many years. I do not think that anyone could question that, and the motion is certainly not a personal attack on him. Mr McCallister also said that the Regional Autism Spectrum Disorder Network Group should be left to carry out its work.

Mary Bradley pointed out that the debate should not be about political point scoring and that personalities should not get in the way of the issue. It is certainly not helpful when that happens.

I thank all the Members who spoke in the debate, which has been good. Members expressed their support for those with autism, and now I urge them to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to instigate a review into the performance of the Regional Autistic Spectrum Disorder Network Group, including consideration of its appointment processes, independence, accountability, transparency, operating structures and competency.

Executive Committee Business

Programme for Government: Delivery Reports

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 15 minutes to propose and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes.

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

That this Assembly notes the Programme for Government delivery reports up to 31 March 2009 and 30 September 2009.

I want to make some brief remarks on the main findings arising from the first Programme for Government delivery report to 31 March 2009 and the second delivery report to 30 September 2009. Both reports provide monitoring data on the progress of Programme for Government implementation, and they are valuable sources of information on the prospects for delivery of individual Programme for Government targets and commitments. As the documents are substantial sources of monitoring information in their own right, I will endeavour to summarise their contents and main findings, including the overall progress of Programme for Government implementation and significant areas of concern. I will conclude with a few reflections on the implications of those findings for the implementation of the current Programme for Government.

I do not wish to oversimplify the information that the reports contain when I say that their aim is to provide information on the overall progress of the Programme for Government over the respective reporting periods. In so doing, they provide useful analysis on programme implementation, in particular on the progress, likely or otherwise, towards the achievement of targets across each of the five priorities that make up the Programme for Government. They also help to identify areas of concern where the rate of progress of implementation is unlikely to lead to the achievement of the outcome or where there are significant doubts that it will do so. The parameters of these business models can differ. Therefore, Members will wish to note the definitions of this particular model.

The colour-coded rating system used ranges from red to green. The target is coloured red in cases where there is a risk to delivery. The target is coloured amber where there is a lack of robust information or where progress has been slow. Targets that have been achieved or are broadly on course to be achieved within the planned time frame are coloured green or amber-green.

I will first examine the progress that has been made to date against the key goals and commitments. There are five priorities, and 38 out of 66 indicators, which represent some 58%, have been met or are broadly on track with significant confidence about the prospects of getting close to the targeted outcome. In priority 1, which deals with growing a dynamic, innovative economy, we have achieved what I believe to be encouraging outcomes, with nine out of the 17 key goals and commitments — some 53% — on track for achievement. That covers areas such as decisions on large-scale investment planning proposals within six months, increasing the number of PhD research students at local universities by 2010, delivering widespread broadband access for businesses by 2011, and supporting and increasing by 90,000 the number of adult learners achieving a qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills by 2015.

Priority 2, which is promoting tolerance, inclusion, health and well-being, reports that 12 of the 17 key goals and commitments, or 71%, are broadly on track for achievement. That includes areas such as extending the concessionary fares scheme during 2008 to provide free public transport to everyone aged 60 and over, the introduction of the employment and support allowance in 2008, a carers advisory service to meet the needs of people with disabilities, and, by 2013, helping people with chronic illnesses to live more active lives and reducing unplanned hospital admissions for such patients by 50%.

Priority 3 is to protect and enhance our environment. Progress has remained steady since June 2009, with five of the 11 key goals and commitments, or 45%, assessed either as being completed or on track for completion. Areas of progress include ensuring that 12% of our electricity is generated from indigenous renewable sources by 2010, enabling up to 4,700 farmers to comply with the nitrates

directive by 2009, and delivering a new sewerage project for central Belfast by 2010.

In priority 4, which is to invest to build our infrastructure, there are no red flags, and eight of the 11 key goals and commitments, or 73%, are reported as either green or amber-green. Those include establishing an international telecommunications link from the north-west directly to North America and Europe by 2009, progress on plans to extend dual carriageways on the east-west and north-west corridors, and the planning, development and commencement of work on the first rapid-transit line in greater Belfast by 2011.

Finally, priority 5 is to deliver modern high-quality public services. Progress in that area has been slower than anticipated, with four out of 10 indicators reported as either green or amber-green. Those include providing a network of one-stop shops to improve access to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's services by 2011, the introduction of a single telephone number contact point for public services in Northern Ireland on a phased basis from December 2008, delivering 5% efficiency savings on administration costs each year for the next three years for all Departments, delivering 3% efficiency savings on Departments' resource budgets, and using the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) to drive higher levels of savings.

Of the 23 individual public service agreements (PSAs) in the September 2009 document, approximately 64% of the 331 PSA indicators are either on course to be met or have already been achieved. Given the economic climate, that is very positive and broadly what we would expect halfway through the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period.

The Programme for Government is being implemented against a significantly more challenging economic context than anyone could have anticipated when it was first drawn up and endorsed by the Assembly. The economic downturn means that we may have to wait much longer than anticipated to make the gains and progress for which we had planned three years ago.

Looking more closely at programme performance, we see that there are areas of concern. Of the 331 PSA targets to be achieved by September 2009, it is possible to identify 40 targets, or

12%, rated as red; 78 targets, or 24%, rated as amber; and 37 targets rated as either completed or closed. Compared with the March 2009 delivery report, those figures represent a deterioration against performance, most clearly with regard to an increase in those delivery targets classified as being in the red category. Given the exceptional economic changes, those trends are not unexpected.

One strength of the Programme for Government monitoring system is its ability to identify strategic areas of concern through those policy areas and actions with multiple red or amber ratings. Where those occur, the target areas are recommended for review meetings at ministerial and official level. On the basis of the March 2009 delivery report, five review meetings were held, which covered promoting the study of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the STEM subjects; greenhouse gas emissions and sustainable development; tourism; regeneration; and productivity growth. The review process has usefully allowed Ministers and the head of the Civil Service to discuss the underlying issues behind progress to date in the nominated areas. It has also enabled us to examine the actions already being taken to remedy slippage in targets, and to identify additional action that could be taken to improve the rate of progress.

2.00 pm

The September 2009 delivery report highlighted three areas for additional review: supporting rural businesses, promoting health and addressing health inequalities, and child poverty and victims. Meetings to discuss those will take place as soon as possible. The monitoring system has helped to identify and highlight issues such as the failure by September 2009 to show any reduction in the incidence of TB in cattle, the risk that the target set for the reduction in the suicide rate will not be met, and the limited progress on targeting relating to smoking, drug use, physical environment and obesity, including the persistent problem of the differential in health outcomes in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland.

I assure Members that, in considering the findings of those detailed reports, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) will be following up with relevant Departments to see what remedial actions can

be taken to address those matters. The delivery reports should be of considerable interest to Assembly Members, particularly Assembly Committees, and to external stakeholder groups, as well as, of course, the general public.

I believe that we have a robust monitoring system for the Programme for Government that provides us with a working mechanism to track progress, identify problem areas and consider appropriate measures to address issues of concern. Where there is a lack of suitable data on progress towards targets, we will make every effort, in tandem with the relevant Departments, to see how such deficiencies can be addressed. Where there is slippage or unnecessary delay in programme implementation, we will work together across government to find appropriate solutions.

In reflecting on the implementation of the Programme for Government and how far we have come, it must be recognised that there is no room for complacency, especially in light of the current economic context. It is reassuring to find that Programme for Government priorities remain valid. That makes it all the more important that we continue to display leadership and purpose in delivering on its commitments. The Programme for Government has always been recognised as ambitious. What is at stake is the future of our economy and society. The successful implementation of the Programme for Government can be transformational. It is a means towards delivering the Executive's aim of a peaceful, fair and prosperous society.

The details that I have set out are neither a result nor an outcome; they are a progress report. The purpose of such a report is to help us to focus on what needs to be achieved, and to show where extra effort or resources are needed. It represents a challenge to all of us to raise our game and to better our performance.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (Mr Kennedy): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important debate, and I thank the First Minister for his contribution.

The OFMDFM Committee received copies of the Programme for Government delivery reports last Monday. We were briefed by departmental officials at our meeting last Wednesday. The reports are key documents in assessing the performance of Departments and the Executive against agreed priorities and targets. The

reports up to September 2009 serve as a mid-term report on the Executive's performance in relation to those priorities and indicators. They show that, between March and September 2009 there was further deterioration in the delivery of the Programme for Government and the five priorities listed by the First Minister. Broadly speaking, 38 of the 66 indicators — nearly 58% — have been met or are on track.

The First Minister brought us through those priorities and gave a very honest assessment of progress or the lack of it. In relation to the 23 public service agreements, 213 out of 331 indicators — 64% — are either on course to be met or have been achieved already.

The Committee was advised by officials that the March delivery report identified five areas that gave cause for concern, which were identified by the First Minister as: regeneration; STEM subjects; greenhouse gasses; sustainable development; and tourism and productivity. Following the September report, a further three areas were added, namely: child poverty and victims; the development of rural businesses; and addressing health inequalities.

My Committee's prime concern relates to the number of concerns about the Department's performance against child poverty indicators and, specifically, the indicator for the elimination of severe child poverty. In the Committee's well-received report on child poverty, we strongly commended the Executive for adopting its target of working towards the elimination of severe child poverty and we recommended that the Executive should establish a baseline and a system of measurement for that severe child poverty target. We are now two years down the line, and the Committee is concerned that there is still no agreed definition of what constitutes severe child poverty. Some Committee members are worried that a system of measurement will be put in place that would make it easier to achieve the target without meaningful actions being taken. We are aware that a balance must be struck.

Members raised concern at delays in the regeneration of the Department's strategic development sites. For example, the regeneration of Ebrington Barracks has moved from being on target in March 2009 to an amber rating in September 2009. Members are also concerned at the delays in the victims' and survivors' service.

Members are concerned at the cost of producing the delivery reports, and the Committee awaits additional information from the Department on the costs associated with that. We also await further information on how best to measure, and so minimise, slippage in the number of Executive Bills introduced to the Assembly. That indicator has also changed from green to amber.

The Committee understands that the period from March 2009 has been particularly difficult and challenging due to the economic downturn and worldwide recession. Nevertheless, the Executive and Departments need to use this mid-term report to consider their priorities and targets for the rest of the Programme for Government period.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the latest Programme for Government delivery report. The aim of the report, as stated, is to provide a full summary of progress against targets and commitments made in the Programme for Government as of 30 December 2009, halfway through the cycle. Constant monitoring and tracking of our commitments and actions are essential if we are to change the patterns of the past. The Executive's decision to implement such a delivery report is a positive one; however, I am sure Members will share my concern that many targets and commitments in the Programme for Government remain unfulfilled.

I am a member of the Committee for OFMDFM, and, as the Chairperson stated, we were briefed on Wednesday that 58% of the key goals and commitments are rated either green or amber/green; meaning that they have been completed or are almost complete. That was welcome news; however, it is slightly down on the previous report. It means that 42% — almost half — of our targets are unlikely to be met or may not be met.

Of course, the Programme for Government was written before the economic collapse, and there is no doubt that the prevailing economic conditions have greatly hindered our ability to achieve what we all signed up to. However, I firmly believe that we can and should be doing much more. When reading the delivery report, I think it is important to remember that we are not just talking about statistics or words on a page; we are talking about people's lives.

Some targets that have been flagged up as red demonstrate the glaring deprivation and inequalities that still exist in our society. For example, we are failing to work towards the elimination of severe child poverty by 2012, and we are failing to facilitate a 50% reduction in the life expectancy differential between the most disadvantaged areas and the North's average. We are also failing to reduce the suicide rate by the 15% target. I do not think that any of us will depart from the view that that simply is not good enough.

It is unacceptable simply to blame the recession. The fact is that if all parties in the Chamber were prepared to display the necessary political will to embrace new and innovative measures, as stated in the Programme for Government, then we could achieve much more. Take the commitment to establish a library authority and an education and skills authority; that is another goal flagged as red in the report. That was an opportunity to streamline services, reduce bureaucracy and generate additional resources for front line services, but because of political foot-dragging, that opportunity will possibly be lost.

Mr Storey: Will the Member add the provision of equality of treatment for the educational sectors to that list, particularly to the transferors who are responsible for the education of 95% of Protestant children in controlled schools?

Ms Anderson: I am my party's equality and human rights spokesperson, and I think that the Member knows that I have fought and argued for money to be allocated on the basis of objective need for everyone here in the North. Perhaps he does not listen to the contributions that I make in the Chamber.

Similarly, the RPA offered savings of £400 million. I know that the Member is probably getting a bit touchy —

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Ms Anderson: No; I will give way in a minute.

The Member is getting touchy because the examples that I am going to give are examples that his party has prevented progress on. For instance, as I was saying, the RPA offered savings of £400 million: that is the amount of money that will be taken off the Budget, through what has been taken off recently and what we have previously lost over time. However, for political reasons, the DUP sought to protect the

26-local-council system, their councillors and their expenses. That is untenable. We know what is being said about the Minister, Eddie Poots: we have had gerrymandering and now we have "Eddie-mandering". He is protecting his council seat.

Despite that, I welcome the fact that child poverty and health inequality have been included in the new areas identified for review along with the public service agreement 4 indicators relating to supporting rural businesses, as the First Minister mentioned. The review should be conducted urgently and appropriate actions identified to redress these failings.

I also welcome the fact that review meetings have taken place to examine the underlying reasons behind the slippage identified in the previous Programme for Government report.

I am particularly interested to see to the joint Department of Education and Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) strategy to promote the uptake of science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. That is an area which, we are told time and time again, is vital to economic recovery and future prosperity here and yet we still lag way behind our own targets. Therefore, I look forward greatly to the DEL and the Department of Education action plan. People will not be surprised to hear me say that I will also be interested to see how the Magee development plan — given its emphasis on science, technology, engineering and maths — will fit into that action plan.

As I said, constant monitoring of our own performance is absolutely essential, but, where failings have been disclosed, swift corrective action must also be identified and implemented. I confirm that we support the motion and I welcome being given the opportunity to address the Chamber.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey):

As we look through both delivery reports that are being discussed, we see that PSAs 10 and 19 in particular contain the targets for the Department of Education. I note that, with one exception, all the education targets had the status on 30th September 2009 of amber/green or green, which denote that they are on course to be achieved within the target time frame or they have been achieved.

However, when I examined the individual targets and the actions in PSAs 10 and 19, I severely doubt whether many of the targets will

be achieved or implemented by April 2011. I will give Members some examples: the draft early years strategy was launched for public consultation on Friday past, and the Committee had written to the Minister of Education to say that key issues were not addressed and that the strategy, as presented, lacked clear proposals on the way forward. Furthermore, PSA 10 included the implementation of a special educational needs review. The Committee for Education and many organisations that represent children who are disabled have set out in detail their serious concerns about the draft SEN strategy. We await the outcome of the consultation. I also note that, under PSA 10, the revised literacy and numeracy strategy is to be implemented; however, the draft strategy has yet to be published. Those targets should be reclassified as red, since there is at least a risk that they will not be delivered within the timescale as set out in this Programme for Government.

However, those are not the only education targets in the delivery reports that are at risk of not being delivered. PSA 19 includes the implementation of a revised policy on alternative education provision. The Committee awaits the draft policy, which the Department originally planned to launch for consultation in March 2009. Likewise, a new community relations strategy is awaited. Under PSA 2, an important target is to increase the uptake of STEM subjects, and the Committee continues to seek Department of Education progress on the implementation of the STEM review. Indeed, at its meeting this Wednesday, the Committee hopes to hear more on that matter from departmental officials.

When I look at education targets in these reports, I see many which will not be delivered. The final one that I will highlight concerns:

“Building projects to be advanced at over 100 schools over the period to 2011”.

The House will hear more on that from the Minister of Education tomorrow. However, last week, the Committee got sight of the Minister’s intended statement, and it now knows that those targets will not be met. I must emphasise that the failure to advance much of this, such as the policy reviews, has nothing to do with the economic downturn or the cuts in the education budget that impacted from 1 April this year. I assure the House that the Committee will continue to press the Minister and her

Department on their lack of progress on all those targets.

2.15 pm

In the moments that are left to me, I shall return to the comments that the Member for Foyle made. She referred to ESA and to the failure to meet that particular Executive objective. It is abundantly clear to us all that Members on the opposite side of the House interpret and spell the term “equality” differently from Members on this side. If we are to move to a shared future, it can be only on the basis of respect for the elements of our community that make up Northern Ireland. That is particularly the case in education. The Member lectured the rest of us for not listening, but if she pays attention, she will understand the arguments on the delivery of equality. With respect to swift action —

Ms Anderson: Does the Member accept that, under section 75(1), the equality of opportunity that we will be working towards by ensuring that the policies and programmes that we put in place to promote that opportunity is absolutely necessary in law? The aims of section 75(2), which deal with a shared future, are desirable, but they do not carry the same weight as those of section 75(1), which are necessary.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Will the Member explain why a certain section of the education world is exempt from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 when it comes to equality? If the Member believes that there should be equality of opportunity, when it comes to having access to a job in any particular sector of the education world, surely no impediment should be placed on any individual seeking employment. Perhaps the Member should take that issue up with the sector that holds tenaciously to an exemption from the 1998 Order.

The Member referred to swift action. Will she ask the Minister of Education to take action, let alone swift action? We have waited years for the early years strategy, which is not fit for purpose, to go out to public consultation. We have waited for a numeracy and literacy strategy and for a special educational needs strategy. We have waited for all those policies, but all that we have seen is what happened in the House last week, which was the non-appearance of the Education Minister who is unprepared or unwilling to deliver on any of those things.

Mr O'Loan: This is an important debate for the Assembly, and even though the Chamber is fairly thinly populated, it is more important than one might think. There is nothing more important for us than the Programme for Government, the content of that programme and the evaluation of performance against that content.

I am disappointed that we have received only a halfway report on performance against Programme for Government targets. We are now fully three quarters of the way through this mandate. The report is dated March 2010, but we are debating it at the end of June. Moreover, the report covers progress only up to September 2009. Therefore, the report is very out of date, and the Assembly deserves better.

Before turning to the subject of the report, I offer a health warning about such reports. In the Finance Committee, we have considerable experience of similar reports. At least there, each target had considerable commentary or explanation that often reflected considerably on how we read the report. In fact, the Committee frequently disputed the red/amber/green (RAG) status adjudications. Indeed, there were discrepancies between reports that the Department of Finance and Personnel provided and those that OFMDFM provided. I hope that those differences have been resolved.

We were concerned that many targets were worded so vaguely and so easily that it would be hard not to deliver on them. Therefore, there is a question mark over how we present the Programme for Government and how we then evaluate it. Nonetheless, the delivery report concludes overall that, since the previous report was produced, there has been:

"further deterioration in the PfG delivery position."

I see that, in five of the 23 core PSAs, half or more of the targets are rated as either red or amber. That should give us concern. Of course, all of the PSAs are important, but we should be particularly concerned when we read the titles of those in which there is particular failure: PSA 4 is supporting rural businesses; PSA 5 is tourism; PSA 6 is children and family; PSA 8 is promoting health and addressing health inequalities; and PSA 12 is housing, urban regeneration and community development.

Three PSAs are selected for particular review. I note that, oddly, just two of those five PSAs and a further one, PSA 7, which is child poverty and victims, are selected. There may be some

explanation as to why that choice of those three for review was made. Paragraph 4.7 of the report, which is the section on equality and good relations, states that:

"The full range of programmes set out by departments should not be seen in isolation. They are very much part of a wider programme across government".

In that case, the programme addresses the specifics of equality and good relations. However, the issue could probably be written larger. We certainly cannot see any individual target or PSA in isolation.

The whole report, looked at more broadly, raises the question of the extent to which our Assembly is really achieving. Workplace 2010, which is a major programme to sell and lease back the Civil Service estate and refurbish it to modern standards of working, is described as "closed". It most certainly should not be a closed issue. We have not seen a revised target and delivery against that.

On a broader front, there are several issues on which the Assembly is explicitly not delivering. I do not highlight them simply to point-score or debunk, but merely to say that we need to do better. In relation to growing the economy, we are only now, three years into our mandate, working towards creating our own strategy for doing that. The reform and modernisation of local government has ground to a halt. We have a stasis over the transfer process in schools and on the formation of the education and skills authority. The Maze stadium died a death. The whole issue of the decentralisation of public sector jobs has not been delivered on. That chimes with the public view that the Assembly is not delivering fully for the people who elected us. I call for a political consensus around the task that we have to deliver in what will be an even more difficult environment, as the First Minister indicated, than the one in which this programme is being delivered. The future is going to be even more difficult, and all the greater need, therefore, for real political action.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member called to speak will be Dr Stephen Farry.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

DOJ: Budget

1. **Mr McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Justice what action he has taken to date to ensure proper scrutiny of his budget. (AQO 1481/10)

The Minister of Justice (Mr Ford): On a monthly basis, I meet with my director of justice delivery to review the Department's finances. Departmental officials also undertake detailed monitoring and scrutiny of budgets. In line with other Northern Ireland Departments, my Department has recently completed the June in-year monitoring process, the findings of which have been presented to the Committee for Justice. The Department is also progressing the planning for its 2010 budget. Although all public finances will be under review, it will be important for me to work with Executive colleagues to ensure that the Department of Justice is not adversely affected. It will also be important for the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Treasury to ensure that the financial settlement agreement made with the previous Prime Minister is fully implemented.

Mr McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answer. The original budget for his Department was ring-fenced when negotiated. The Minister has also engaged early on the issue of legal aid, and I welcome and support that. What other early justice finance priorities does the Minister want to see addressed?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McLaughlin for his question. Subsequent questions will be asked later today on legal aid. Therefore, I do not want to develop that issue too much at this point, as I risk offending other Members by answering their questions in advance. I do want to take up the point Mr McLaughlin made on the concept of ring-fencing, because there is a widespread assumption that that represents a form of protection for the Department of Justice budget. However, if cuts are made to the relevant budgets in England, those cuts will

apply to Northern Ireland through the Barnett formula, and ring-fencing could be detrimental to the Department's budget. That will raise particular difficulties for the Assembly in the light of the financial package agreed with the then Prime Minister and the difficulties the Department and its agencies currently face.

Mr Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he assure the House that his budget can be adapted to meet different priorities throughout any given year? Priorities can change and the focus may move from burglaries to traffic accidents or antisocial behaviour.

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Shannon for his question. However, the issues that he highlighted are operational issues. It is the sole responsibility of the Chief Constable to decide on how he and his managers manage their resources to deal with problems identified through consultation with district policing partnerships (DPPs) and in accordance with their overall plan. As far as the overall departmental budget is concerned, it would be relatively difficult to transfer budgets from one agency to another during the course of a year unless there were particular pressing problems.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister tell the House what protocols are in place to assist him in accessing the national Reserve, so that exceptional security pressures could be met?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McNarry for his question. The protocol was the agreement between the then Prime Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in the letter that set out the availability of resources as a prelude to the devolution of policing and justice powers to the Assembly. If there were any requests for additional funding from the national Reserve, a case would have to be made by the Chief Constable to the Department of Justice and the Department of Finance and Personnel for onward transmission to the Treasury. An additional £37 million was granted this year at the request of the Chief Constable, and I am determined that any further requests with robust business cases will be supported for transmission by the Department. Indeed, discussion is currently ongoing in relation to some additional funding.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his replies. Will he confirm whether a business case has been completed for the rebuilding of Magilligan prison, which is in urgent need of

replacement? Will he assure the House that the funds needed to rebuild that prison are available?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Maginness for that question. The simple answer is that the business case has not been finally completed for the replacement of Magilligan prison. It is clear that there is a pressing need to deal with the substandard accommodation at Magilligan and to provide a fit-for-purpose prison to replace it. The full details of that will have to be seen in accordance with the business case, and, in the light of the Chancellor's Budget last week, it would be a foolish Minister who predicted exactly when resources would become available.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I should have said that question 5 has been withdrawn.

Maghaberry Prison: Governor

2. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice to outline plans for filling the vacant governor's post at Maghaberry prison. (AQO 1482/10)

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McKay for his question. The governor's post at Maghaberry is an important role in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. Maghaberry is a complex and challenging environment, and one that requires clear leadership and resilience. As Members will know, the post is being filled on a temporary basis for some months. The Prison Service will shortly launch an open competition for high-calibre candidates with experience of working in prisons at senior level. I want to ensure that we have the best candidates to fill the post substantively. That process should be completed by the autumn and, in the meantime, I have taken steps to refresh the management team. A new interim governor and deputy from the Northern Ireland Prison Service have taken up post at Maghaberry today. I pay tribute to the hard work of the existing governor and his deputy, who have been managing the prison in the interim.

Mr McKay: I thank the Minister for his answer. I agree that the new governor at Maghaberry will have a number of challenges ahead. Does the Minister agree that the new governor, when he takes his post, should prioritise the many long-term difficulties and problems at Maghaberry, including those at Roe House? Will he ensure that a proper management structure is in place

that does not simply act at the behest of the POA?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McKay for that question. Clearly, a range of serious issues are to be addressed at Maghaberry, not just the issues at Roe House, which he identified. When I announced the review of the Prison Service to the House last week, I said that it would focus initially on Maghaberry, because, as our biggest and most complex prison, it has a number of issues that need to be addressed.

The Member referred to the role of the Prison Officers' Association (POA). Reports, including the Pearson report, highlight issues that need to be addressed to do with employment issues. It is also right that staff should have access to a trade union to represent their position on employment issues, and it is important that trade unions, particularly in areas as sensitive as trade unions, take a mature and responsible approach. I will certainly encourage management and the POA to work together to deliver the outcomes that the public expect to achieve a modern, efficient Prison Service that operates within budget and which provides for the needs of society.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister ensure that at the top of the priority list for the new governor, once appointed permanently, will be the welfare of staff who work in the prison and who face horrendous challenges, particularly at Roe House? Will he ensure that the staff will be the priority in attempting to ensure a stable environment in the prison?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for that point. It is not possible to identify a single priority for the new governor at Maghaberry; it is clear that a range of issues must be addressed, and a significant issue is the threat that prison officers face from some of the prisoners who are accommodated in Roe House and from some of the people with whom they are associated outside. It is utterly reprehensible that members of prison staff have had their names featured on certain websites where allegations and threats are made against them. That should not be tolerated anywhere in society.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Minister agree that the new governor will have to have the necessary resources to be able to effect fundamental reform in Maghaberry? Does the Minister believe that the Prison Officers' Association will

approach the need for reform with an open and constructive attitude?

The Minister of Justice: I am sure that the Member does not wish me to indulge in speculation about the future actions of a group of employees.

However, it is absolutely clear that there has been positive change in sections of the Prison Service; that change has been managed by individuals who are members of the POA. Therefore, I do not accept that the POA is, in every respect, a block to progress. It is also clear that major changes are needed in the Prison Service as we seek to provide a much more rehabilitative regime than exists in any of our prisons to ensure better protection for society. I have no doubt that prison officers and others who are associated with the Prison Service will all be required to play their part in carrying out that aim.

Mr K Robinson: I have listened very carefully to the Minister's comprehensive answers. However, does he not realise that any slippage in dealing with issues in Maghaberry prison will have a serious knock-on effect for the rest of society?

The Minister of Justice: The Member makes an entirely valid point. No one could be unaware of the urgent need to address a range of issues in the Prison Service. That is why, when I took up this post, I made that one of my key priorities; moreover, it is why I am seeking an early and speedy report from the review group that looks initially at Maghaberry. We cannot allow the current situation to persist; we must ensure that the prison is fit for purpose and provides for the needs of society in every respect. There is no doubt that difficulties in the prison can affect the wider community, particularly at this time of year.

Legal Representation

3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to ensure that effective legal representation remains available to people who cannot afford their own legal services.
(AQO 1483/10)

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Boylan for his question. I am committed to the principle of providing access to justice for people who cannot afford their own legal services. That commitment includes, of course, ensuring that

people have effective legal representation when they need it.

The legal aid system has served the people of Northern Ireland well and provides more than 100, 000 acts of assistance with legal problems every year. The devolution funding settlement that was announced by Gordon Brown on 21 October 2009 provides an annual budget of almost £80 million for publicly funded legal services in Northern Ireland. That budget will allow Northern Ireland to spend more per head of population on legal services than any other part of the United Kingdom or Ireland.

My officials in the Courts and Tribunals Service are taking forward a comprehensive programme of legal aid reform. I am satisfied that that reform can be implemented in a manner that will ensure that access to justice is maintained, including access to effective representation for those in need of help who cannot afford to pay for legal aid themselves. Devolution now provides the opportunity to decide how best to help people secure access to justice in Northern Ireland. That is why I intend to undertake a fundamental review of public legal services. This is a real opportunity to reinvent the way in which legal services are provided to the public and to put it on a sustainable basis for the future. I am confident that Members will wish to work with me to achieve that.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I think the Minister for his answer. Although, like many Members, I will agree that all public moneys need to be properly managed and should ensure value for money, does the Minister recognise that it is important that those who require legal representation are not penalised for the possible excesses of others?

The Minister of Justice: I agree. That is why I am determined to continue to provide adequate resources for legal aid. However, we also need to ensure that adequate levels of resources do not apply excessive levels in the face of the financial restrictions that we all now work under.

Lord Morrow: Perhaps I picked the Minister up wrong, but I want him to clarify something. Did he say that legal aid serves the people well or serves the legal profession well? Does the Minister not accept that we do not need a long inquiry into the reform of legal aid? Will he apply his resources to ensure that reform happens swiftly and that we do not run into another expensive inquiry that we can ill afford?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Lord Morrow for that question. I said that the public legal aid services have served the people of Northern Ireland well, because I believe that that is the case. However, there is no doubt that, in recent years, its costs have been significant. The issue was addressed in the agreement between the Prime Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister late last year.

I am prepared to proceed extremely speedily to deal with the basic reforms to legal aid, which the House has heard about on a number of occasions. However, we need to consider the fundamental purpose behind legal aid to ensure that we have a system of public legal services to help people to solve their problems and not necessarily simply to provide advocacy in courts. I want a system that puts greater emphasis on solving problems outside court and provides a wider choice in the type of legal help that is available to those in need. That will be a more fundamental reform than the basic changes that we are making at present. It will take more time to work through, but I do not believe that it will be an expensive process.

2.45 pm

Mr Gallagher: When the Minister introduces reforms, will he work with the legal profession to devise a new civil legal aid system to deal with money damages cases, so that the system will ensure adequate access for legal aid and will also, effectively, be capable of paying for itself?

The Minister of Justice: I welcome Mr Gallagher's suggestion that such matters could pay for themselves. That would be a major step forward. I accept his fundamental point, and my officials are working with representatives of both branches of the legal profession in seeking to make the necessary reforms. We need to consider the issue of civil legal aid, as well as criminal legal aid, where the bulk of the concentration has been up to now. We will continue to do that with a view to ensuring that the entire legal system is fit for purpose.

Saville Report

4. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the findings of the Saville report. (AQO 1484/10)

8. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the Saville report. (AQO 1488/10)

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McCartney and Mr McCrea for their questions. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 10 together. Although Lord Saville's report on Bloody Sunday contains no direct implications for the Department of Justice, I believe that it is comprehensive, provides the opportunity to put the truth on the record and, at the same time, help to heal the wounds suffered by the families over the past 38 years.

The report undoubtedly raises questions about how Northern Ireland deals with its past and how we can move forward as a society. Although those issues are primarily for the Northern Ireland Office and OFMDFM to consider, I will ensure that the Department of Justice plays its part in contributing to the promotion of reconciliation and of a shared future. I hope and expect that the crucial roles played by the Historical Enquiries Team and the Police Ombudsman are recognised and supported by the NIO, which retains the strategic lead on issues arising from the past.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, can I clarify whether you meant to say question 8 or question 10? I was told that it was question 8.

The Minister of Justice: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker. It was supposed to be question 8.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he seek a report from the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) on its assessment of the Saville report? Does he intend to make a statement to the Assembly on the findings of the Saville report at some time in the future?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr McCartney for those two points. I will not seek a report from the Public Prosecution Service, because the responsibility for dealing with the outcome of the Saville report lies squarely with the Public Prosecution Service and not with the Department of Justice. It is not my role as Minister to seek a report from the PPS in any respect. Therefore, I will leave that point to be followed through by the relevant authorities. There may also be involvement from the PSNI in respect of how that is dealt with.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Minister agree that the dignified response to the Prime Minister's statement in the House of Commons, coupled

with the measured tones of many commentators and sections of the community, might form the basis of some way to deal with the past? Will he seek to build on that opportunity so that we can move the Province forward?

The Minister of Justice: That is a valid point. The dignity that we saw in response to the publication of the Saville report from the families, the people of Derry, the Prime Minister and the entire House of Commons is a measure of how much we have moved forward in this society in recent years and how much people were able to do.

Clearly, wider lessons need to be learned. We cannot have a Saville-type inquiry for all the tragedies of the past. The fundamental matter of dealing with the past must be done collectively by the Executive. Although the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have lead policy responsibility for the victims and survivors of the Troubles, I believe that it is incumbent on all Ministers to co-operate to deal with the past and to seek to create a shared future. We will all have to address the legacy of the past in our own areas of responsibility. Certainly, the Department of Justice will play its part.

Mr G Robinson: When will the final costings for the Saville report be made available to the public?

The Minister of Justice: I am afraid that that is entirely a question for the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's comments about healing wounds. There has been a wound at the heart of Derry city, which has been hurt. However, that hurt can now ease.

Does the Minister welcome the British Prime Minister's statement that the 14 murders in Derry were "unjustified and unjustifiable"? I am aware that the Minister met the families when he was in the role of shadow Minister, but will he meet again the families of those who lost their lives and those who were injured on Bloody Sunday once, as Raymond McCartney rightly said, he has made his own assessment of Saville's findings?

The Minister of Justice: I agree entirely with the Prime Minister's assessment of Saville. I do not need to add any words to his assessment. As Mr Ramsey stated correctly, in February 2010, I, as an individual and as a party leader, met

the majority of the families of those who died. At that time and, indeed, when the report was published, I indicated that if the families wished to meet me again, I would be happy to meet them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Prisoners: Healthcare

6. **Mr W Clarke** asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he, or his officials, have had with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety regarding the provision of health care to prisoners. (AQO 1486/10)

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Clarke for his question. I will meet with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in early July 2010 to discuss a range of health issues that affect prisoners. Healthcare provision is discussed regularly at meetings of the joint prison partnership board. That is a multiagency and multidisciplinary board that meets bimonthly to agree strategic operational priorities and to review primary and secondary healthcare services to prisoners throughout the prison estate.

Mr W Clarke: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree that prisoners with mental health needs are being failed by the current system? Furthermore, does he agree that there is a duty on the Prison Service and the Health Service to meet those prisoners' medical needs?

The Minister of Justice: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. There is no doubt that healthcare facilities in the Prison Service have improved since responsibility for them was handed over to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. There is also no doubt that work still needs to be done, particularly in connection to mental health, which the Member highlighted.

It is generally accepted that significant work needs to be done in that area, given the number of prisoners who have mental health problems or personality disorders. All prisoners who are assessed as having a mental illness are referred to the mental health team for assessment and treatment. The new reach and outreach facilities that are proposed for Maghaberry will go some way towards helping prisoners with mental health needs and vulnerabilities. However, the problem exists at

all three prison establishments. I am grateful to the South Eastern Trust for its continuing efforts to reform and modernise services for all prisoners with mental health problems.

Mr Bell: Does the Minister agree that there is also a need to look at the health and safety of our prison officers, particularly in the light of some of the conditions that they face? Will he ensure that his Department gives the same respect to prison officers' health and safety as is given to that of people in every other service in the public sector?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Bell for his question. Certainly, as their employer, the Prison Service owes a duty of care to prison officers. However, I am not sure that it is entirely equivalent to that which is owed to prisoners, who have no opportunity to access healthcare facilities in the community. At the same time, there is no doubt that much needs to be done to ensure that a duty of care is provided to prison officers, given the difficulties that some of them face.

Mr Dallat: Recently, the Minister promised to review the Prison Service completely. Given that probably 70% of prisoners experience mental health problems and other personality disorders, does he not believe that it is time for a comprehensive review of how stakeholders and other interested parties view the entire issue? Will he promise the House that those 70% of prisoners will have the rights that they deserve?

The Minister of Justice: The simple answer is that the review of the Prison Service will include all aspects of the management of prisons, including healthcare. Given my background, I am entirely conscious of the difficulties in the mental health field; the number of prisoners who have, as Mr Dallat said, psychiatric problems and personality disorders; and the real need to ensure that services are improved.

Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group

7. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the 'Wrong Kind of Victim?' report by the Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group.
(AQO 1487/10)

The Minister of Justice: I welcome the positive and helpful report. Human trafficking is nothing less than modern-day slavery, and it is vital that we continue to raise public awareness of the suffering caused by those who seek to

profit from the exploitation of the vulnerable. My officials participated in the background research leading to the report's publication on 16 June, and I will consider carefully the recommendations that fall within my remit.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. The report contains pointed criticisms of how the agency treated victims and how the perpetrators remain free. I believe that no charges were levied. What steps are being taken to increase the number of prosecutions while providing more support for the victims?

The Minister of Justice: Mr Hilditch has highlighted a serious issue. I understand that just two people have been charged with the offence of trafficking for sexual exploitation and that the cases are currently proceeding through the courts. Although the Chief Constable has assured me that the police are doing all that they can in that area, as we all know, in order to bring charges and obtain convictions, the police need evidence and witnesses who are willing to testify in court. Unfortunately, many of the women who are recovered choose not to testify. Once rescued, many simply decide to go home to their families while, in other cases, witnesses have disappeared. There is certainly no disinclination on the part of the relevant agencies to take prosecutions forward, but there is a real difficulty in getting the necessary witness evidence.

Ms Lo: One of the report's criticisms is that victims of human trafficking are prosecuted while the real criminals continue to profit. Can the Minister tell me whether those arrested in recent cannabis raids in Northern Ireland are being prosecuted as criminals or treated as potential victims of crime?

The Minister of Justice: I am afraid that my colleague has caught me out on that one, but I will ensure that I write to her about the matter.

Mr Kinahan: Can the Minister provide the House with an evaluation of the support package that is provided to victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland? Can he also give us an indication as to whether his Department will continue to finance that package, which I believe runs out in September?

The Minister of Justice: I thank Mr Kinahan for those rather easier questions. As he correctly says, the pilot scheme runs out in September. It was recently evaluated, and,

although the evaluation identified areas in which improvements could be made, the overall conclusion was that we had met the standards set out in the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. For example, a victim who has been through the pilot scheme supported that assertion. Not only was she satisfied with the care that she received, but she has been successfully reintegrated into society and is living in independent accommodation and serving the community as a volunteer. I hope to put in place a more permanent scheme after the pilot runs out on 30 September.

Youth Justice

9. **Mr B Wilson** asked the Minister of Justice to outline his policy on youth justice.
(AQO 1489/10)

The Minister of Justice: The reality in this society is that most children do not offend. For the small number who do offend, we have proportionate, progressive and restorative arrangements that aim to reduce the risk of further offending and help to reconnect children with their families and communities. The Department subscribes to the policy of custody as a last resort but recognises that it is sometimes required to protect the public. In that regard, we are, in conjunction with key partners, making significant progress in reviewing custodial arrangements for young offenders under the age of 18.

With the Youth Justice Agency in the lead, the review aims to use the skills and expertise that exist in the agency and the Prison Service to deliver better-focused outcomes for young people in custody, to support reintegration and to reduce reoffending. Some of the outcomes of that valuable work have already been implemented, and it has the potential to deliver further significant improvements to our juvenile custody services. I hope to be able to announce the outcome of the review in the near future.

3.00 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we begin questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development, I inform the House that question 10 has been withdrawn.

European Commission Fine/DARD Mapping Systems

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking to investigate and address the factors that led to the £60 million European Commission fine. (AQO 1495/10)

5. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking to ensure that there is no recurrence of the maladministration that resulted in the recent European Commission fine. (AQO 1499/10)

7. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the improvements in her Department's mapping systems will be implemented. (AQO 1501/10)

12. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on discussions with the European Commission in relation to the £60 million disallowance imposed after the audit of subsidy payments. (AQO 1506/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (Ms Gildernew): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 5, 7 and 12 together. I recognise that my Assembly colleagues are aware of the background to the issue, and I thank them for their ongoing support. I can now advise the House that, in line with Commission protocols, the Agricultural Funds Committee was consulted on 18 June on the disallowance relating to the first audit in 2006, and a formal decision by the Commission is expected in July. I stress that my Department has been proactive on a number of fronts in taking steps to address the issues and ensuring that there is no recurrence of the factors that led to the disallowance.

We have constantly challenged the Commission's view on the level and proportionality of the disallowance. We provided the Commission with evidence that the actual risk to the fund is much less than the 5% proposed. We have taken the 2006 and 2008 audits to the conciliation body, and we are taking legal advice as to whether to challenge the 2006 audit through the European Court of Justice. I also

discussed that with the Attorney General. I have spoken to Mariann Fischer Boel, and my colleagues in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development have raised our position with Commission representatives. I raised the issue at my meeting with the new EU Agriculture Commissioner, Dacian Ciolos on 23 June.

From 2006, we have actively encouraged farmers to tell us of changes to their maps, and we have reviewed our inspection procedures. In 2007, we introduced orthophotography, and from 2008, we have used GPS equipment to measure fields. We have also taken action to recover moneys in all cases where we have found that land has been incorrectly claimed.

Although we still firmly believe that the level of disallowance proposed is much higher than any risk to the fund, and we continue to challenge that, we accept that, if we do not resolve the situation to the Commission's satisfaction, we will continue to face some level of ongoing disallowance. As the potential for single farm payments on ineligible areas is one of the auditors' main concerns, we have commissioned a project to systematically review and, where necessary, amend every field in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) system. That will ensure that all ineligible areas are identified and removed. We will also have to consider the impact of the removal of those areas on entitlements and previous payments.

The pilot project is under way. That is necessary to allow us to set and to test the criteria to be used in the main project. We aim to begin the main project in the autumn and to complete it by the end of next year. New maps will be issued to farmers early in 2012. We believe that that will satisfy the Commission's concern and should significantly reduce the risk of further disallowance.

The second phase will deal with some other mapping issues, which are of less concern to the Commission and, therefore, much less likely to attract a disallowance. That process will be completed by the end of next year.

While we continue to challenge the Commission's proposal regarding disallowance, we are working to satisfy its concerns and to ensure that our approach meets its requirements. My Department and I are committed to resolving the issue and to reducing the amount of disallowance being paid.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister has taken almost four minutes to answer my question. She will know that I have challenged her on this question on a number of occasions. Considering the volume of questions coming behind me, does the Minister not think that it is past the time when she should have brought a statement to the House explaining the situation fully? That would give all Members the opportunity to challenge the reasons given as to why this has happened. Sixty million pounds is a huge amount of money to go out of Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must come to his question.

Mr McCarthy: Does she think that it is worthwhile to come to the House with a full statement and give us the opportunity to challenge it?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

I did not think that I needed to come to the House with a statement. My main concern is about working towards resolving the issues. There has been very good support from Assembly colleagues, especially those in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I believed that there was a significant level of understanding in the House, which did not suggest that there was a need for a statement.

Mr Moutray: Can the Minister apprise the House whether the £60 million disallowance is the end of the matter and whether, following a review of the 2009 scheme year, no further disallowances can or will be forthcoming? Has she had any discussions with the EU Commission to ensure that, if there are to be further disallowances, they will not be of the same level?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

I will be keen to ensure that the work that we are doing now will mitigate further disallowances, but there have been a number of audits, and we must look at the challenges that have been exposed by those audits and ensure that we have systems in place. That means working with farmers, and I am pleased to report that 16% of farmers came in this springtime to get their maps checked after years of us asking them to do so. We want to work with farmers to ensure that their information is up to date.

We are also working closely with Land and Property Services (LPS), an agency of the Department of Finance and Personnel, because we need to have the maps and the correct mapping facilities in order to mitigate future disallowances. I raised that matter with Dacian Ciolos last week, and I have asked him for a further meeting to discuss it. We will bring the matter to every level necessary, but given that the European Court of Auditors sets the level of disallowance, we want it to be reviewed downwards.

We have also looked at what has happened in other member states, and I can assure the House that we are not the only offenders, nor are we the worst, cold comfort though that is. We are working with everyone that we can, and that includes taking the proper legal advice to determine how we can challenge the disallowance through the courts. Everything that can be done is being done, but there may still be some level of disallowance if the European Commission continues on its current route, and I am doing my absolute utmost to mitigate that.

Mr B McCrea: The Minister is always most disarming in the way that she presents a case. Although we support her and her Department, there is an issue behind her soothing words. We are struggling to find £60,000 to keep the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch open, yet we seem to have mislaid £60 million. The numbers are huge. I wonder whether the Minister can explain where that £60 million is going to come from. Has she discussed the matter with the Minister of Finance and Personnel and can she give us some comfort that that money will be available?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

I will try not to be too disarming, Basil; you would not like to see me when I am grumpy.

Of course, I have raised the issue and have had discussions about it with the Finance Minister, and I have been working for some time to resolve it. In my initial discussions with my Department, there was no indication that the disallowance level would be as high as it was, and that came as something of a shock to us. However, because of the difficulties in rolling out the scheme, we recognised that there could be some potential for disallowance down the line. As a precautionary measure, my Department had been putting money aside and rolling it up with a fund in the Department for Environment,

Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to enable us to meet the disallowance with money that was available for that purpose.

We did not expect to get hit with a disallowance figure of 5%. We are still working on conciliation, through the legal route, to try to have the disallowance amount reduced. However, I assure the House categorically that £60 million did not go astray; someone decided that the level of risk to the EU fund was of that magnitude. No one claimed that money. It is not money that was fraudulently claimed. I assure the House that there has been no wrongdoing on anyone's part.

The EU believes that the level should be set at 5%, but we believe that that figure should be much smaller. Because of the single farm payment, all our schemes are rolled up, and that 5% hits the whole amount. As I said, some of our neighbours have been hit far worse, but other European member states are also affected. I had a good conversation about the issue last week with Jim Nicholson, and we talked about where that money goes. It is like having an overdraft at the bank: the European Commission does not send us that money. That is how it is able to deduct the disallowance off the overall amount. I assure the House categorically that £60 million has not gone astray.

Lord Morrow: The Minister has given a startling reply today, because four of the 15 questions that are down for oral answer relate to this issue. Yet, it was not important enough for her to feel that she should come to the House with a statement about a £60 million fine.

We recognise the fact that there has been no error in her Department in relation to the £60 million. However, it must be a severe embarrassment to her and to her Department that she should be landed with a £60 million fine. Will she now reconsider her position in light of what has been said today, come to the House with a statement and bring her departmental officials with her?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

I will absolutely, categorically not be reviewing my position. I do not believe that anybody would have —

Lord Morrow: You should be embarrassed.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development:

I am not embarrassed. I absolutely refute the Member's allegations. I

have been working very hard on the issue, along with my officials, to mitigate it. I said today that the issue has hit other member states much harder than it has hit us; it is affecting every member state. We are putting a system in place to ensure that future mitigation does not happen. We are working on our maps and orthophotography and making sure that there is a system in place that is robust enough to mitigate any future disallowance. The difficulty is that Europe can pick a figure and impose it on us. We are seeking legal advice on the issue and taking it to the very highest level.

Mr P J Bradley: Does the Minister agree that many of the so-called false claims that led, in part, to the fine came about as a result of inaccuracies on the original maps provided by DARD, or is it the opinion of the Minister that the original maps were 100% accurate?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: The original maps were not 100% accurate. We are working with LPS to ensure that that accuracy is built into the system. The orthophotographs that LPS is using are created from high-quality aerial images, and distortions caused by the earth's surface and aircraft movement are removed from them. The result is a scale-accurate image, offering a detailed bird's-eye view of the landscape. That was not available to us when the problem started, which is partly why we are playing catch-up.

We have over 742,000 fields, and we do not have the resources to cover the cost of ground-survey mapping on every single field in the North of Ireland. We had to find a system that worked and that gave an accurate assessment of what was on the ground so that that could be used. Six, seven or eight years ago, we did not have the technology to produce those maps, but we are putting that system in place now.

Regional Food Programme

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the range of projects funded through the regional food programme in the last financial year and for her assessment of the importance of this programme. (AQO 1496/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development: I thank the Member for his question. DARD administers the regional food programme, which aims to promote quality

regional food. Under the programme, assistance is available to develop and expand profitable and sustainable markets by encouraging better co-operation and communication between all sectors of the food industry. The Member may be aware of the slow food movement and the fuchsia brand emanating from west Cork. Those are perfect examples of where that approach has succeeded, and our programme aspires to mirror those ventures.

There were three tranches of funding through the regional food programme in the past financial year, with letters of offer totalling £424,800. Some 28 separate programmes received letters of offer, including projects from each of the five categories available in the programme. Those categories are regional fairs; information programmes; award ceremonies; seminars or workshops; and market intelligence. Each project had to meet the aim of the programme to promote quality regional food and to increase its consumption domestically and further afield.

The programme has supported a wide range of initiatives, which have not only promoted local quality produce but have led to greater collaboration across the entire local agrifood sector. Examples of some of the successful projects that were delivered include the Armagh Bramley apple blossom fair at Loughgall; the Magherafelt Christmas speciality food market; Derry City Council's participation at national food exhibitions; the national sausage week awards; the 'Taste of Ulster' — some of Ulster — 'Guide'; the food pavilion at the Balmoral Show; and the inaugural great Belfast food week. I attended several of those events and saw for myself the value and importance of connecting our producers with consumers and allowing our local produce to be clearly exhibited to local people and tourists alike.

The regional food programme was initially established as part of the implementation of the 'Fit for Market' report, which was published by the food strategy group in November 2004. With a remit to promote local produce, it is the primary vehicle used by my Department to assist our agrifood industry in its endeavours to showcase the quality food that is available here.

I am fully committed to supporting local producers in that way. Feedback and evaluations from the funded project promoters show the need for and value gained by the programme,

and many of them highlighted the economic and social benefits for the agrifood industry. A full list of the funded projects can be found through the regional food programme link on the DARD website.

3.15 pm

Mr McElduff: Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as ucht a freagra.

I thank the Minister for her answer. She will know that I have a preference for a nine-county fry, as distinct from a Six County fry. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister provide some commentary on the renaissance of Atlantic food authenticity and economic links (RAFAEL) project? I know from the feedback that I have received in County Tyrone that that project has gone down particularly well there. I would, therefore, like to think that that it is being rolled out further. What strengths does the Minister attribute to that project?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The RAFAEL project in the west specifically relates to public sector procurement of local food. My Department and project partners contributed to the success of that INTERREG-funded project, which aimed to encourage local authentic food producers to develop new markets, such as the public sector. Under EU legislation, the procurement of locally produced food by public sector bodies cannot be restricted to specific locations or suppliers. The challenge, therefore, was and is to work with suppliers to help them to compete more successfully.

The main focus of the local RAFAEL project, which was centred in the north-west, was to encourage and support local food producers and processors to develop and to compete successfully for business in the public sector, specifically in hospitals and schools, which need high-quality food for the most vulnerable. Many of the producers who became involved in that project now supply the health and education authorities.

Since the end of the RAFAEL project, my Department has continued to run awareness workshops in conjunction with our partners from that project to highlight when food procurement projects are being released and how the tender

process is conducted. That work is ongoing. I fully support the promotion and purchase of local food, and my Department supports a number of actions to underpin that.

Mr Kennedy: Turn over the page.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: No, I will finish there, Danny. However, any time that you have a supplementary question, feel free to jump in, son.

Mr Elliott: I am pleased that Mr McElduff prefers a nine-county fry, as opposed to a 26- or 32-county fry. At least we are making progress with him.

The regional food programme encourages the consumption of locally produced food. However, what action has the Minister taken to protect Northern Ireland milk and dairy products in the Republic of Ireland, where there is a campaign against them?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: That is a fairly tenuous link, but I will answer the Member's question. I met my Southern counterpart, Brendan Smith, to discuss the issue, and I raised it with the Food Standards Agency and others, such as Bord Bia. Work is continuing to ensure that those markets are available to our producers.

Mr Burns: The regional food programme is now closed to applications. Therefore, would the Minister consider it beneficial to the local food industry to introduce a promotional programme that would continue to deliver the aims of the regional programme?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The budgetary pressures that all Departments face dictate that all work areas must be scrutinised to assess their importance and relevance to the industry. Evaluations and feedback from the stakeholders who utilise the programme will be taken into consideration when taking funding decisions about the future of the programme. However, I am pleased to inform the Member that the regional food programme will continue in 2010-11. From the first tranche of applications, several projects have received letters of offer to assist them in the delivery of their food promotion projects.

Mr Bell: I wish to ask the Minister about the impact on programmes in this and subsequent financial years should another European

Commission fine be imposed. The Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee made a very —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, Mr Bell. We have moved on to a different question about the regional food programme.

Mr Bell: My supplementary question is on the same subject, because it relates to programmes in this financial year. If we are fined again —

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have moved on from the question on fines to one about the regional food programme.

Question No 3 has been withdrawn.

Forestry

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the possibility that Northern Ireland could become self-sufficient in supplying the timber required for housing, and other purposes, and whether she has any plans to expand the forestry sector. (AQO 1498/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: With the substantial increase in forest cover, as identified in the forest strategy, there is the potential for us to become self-sufficient in a range of timber and timber products. Around 400,000 cubic metres of timber and timber products are consumed each year in the North, with sawmills producing around 320,000 cubic metres of timber and timber products annually. However, as the Member will know, timber is an internationally traded product and those marketing it will seek best value. As a result, over half the timber processed in the North is sold to Southern markets or to Britain. What remains for home production means that we are approximately 16% self-sufficient in construction timber, 34% self-sufficient in pallet and packaging timber and fully self-sufficient in fencing products.

Our forestry strategy confirmed that the Forest Service will continue to maintain the supply of timber from forests and that annual timber production from the Department's forests has expanded from 300,000 cubic metres of round wood in 2000 to the current level of 400,000 cubic metres. The forest strategy also identified a long-term aim of doubling the area of woodland in the North so that people can benefit from economic development through timber production and enjoy the recreational

and environmental benefits. Our Programme for Government (PFG) target seeks to create 1,650 hectares of new woodland by March 2011. A doubling of woodland cover will provide us, in time, with more timber for processing and added value, and has the potential to make us self-sufficient in a range of timber and timber products. However, the extent to which that happens will depend on how much of our processed timber reaches export markets.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her very extensive answer. She talked about bulk. However, has any real assessment been made of how much money could be saved? My second point partly pertains to that. Will the Minister investigate whether, by some mechanism, land could be put into forestry without the single farm payment being lost? My understanding is that one of the biggest obstacles to planting trees is the loss of the single farm payment. Therefore, could an alternative subsidy be found, even if that were only for two or three years, as a bridge to carry people through and wean them off the single farm payment?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I am very aware of stakeholders' frustration and the challenges surrounding the important issue of the definition of the word "farmer". The present definition, for the purposes of the farm woodland premium scheme, which is almost the equivalent of what the Member is talking about, has eluded us. The current definition in the rural development programme is that a farmer is someone who derives at least 25% of their income from farming, taking account of all the land that they farm. However, for forestry, the rate is 15%, and that creates difficulties. I raised that issue with the new commissioner last week, and I hope to discuss it with him at a future meeting. I understand where the Member is coming from and we are trying to resolve the issue.

Rev Dr Robert Coulter: Before the Minister sets her Department a high target such as self-sufficiency in timber, will she review the much less extensive targets that she made in the Programme for Government? Given that DARD is unlikely to meet many PFG targets on the development of forestry, does she accept that any decision to extend the forestry sector must be taken in conjunction with an analysis of how the sector has functioned to date?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Between April 2008 and March 2010, the first two years of the PFG period, 502 hectares of new woodland have been created by farmers and landowners under the woodland grants scheme, which, I accept, is much less than the 1,100 hectares planned for this stage of the PFG target period. In November 2009, to encourage more farmers and landowners to create woodland, I announced an increase in grant rates of up to 30%. Since then, there has been a significant increase in applications, although it is too early to predict whether that interest will translate into new woodland. Therefore, applications are coming through, but, at this stage, I am not sure how many of those will be successful given the 15% figure that was raised by the Member who spoke previously.

However, it is good that there is renewed interest in woodland creation, and continued promotion of forestry schemes, together with the work of the Forest Service, will, I hope, put us back on course to meet the Programme for Government woodland target. However, achieving that will be very challenging.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline how the Forestry Bill will help to increase forest cover?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I hope that the Bill will continue to allow us to provide grant assistance to those creating woodland. In addition, the Bill explicitly includes environmental, biodiversity and climate change mitigation measures in the definition of forestry. That, with the recognition in the Bill of the social benefits of woodlands, such as recreation, health and well-being, provides clear indication for all those in government and in local government, as well as private landowners, of the benefits of creating woodland. The new Bill will also help us to protect woodland through a requirement for those planning to fell trees to apply for felling licences.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been grouped.

Supermarkets: Food Prices

6. **Mrs M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she can provide an assurance that the appointment

of a supermarket ombudsman will not lead to an increase in the retail price of food products in our local supermarkets. (AQO 1500/10)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: The appointment of a supermarket ombudsman and retail pricing are reserved matters and, therefore, not in my remit. However, I agree with the concept of fair pricing and welcome the new British Government's acceptance in principle of the need for an ombudsman.

The aim of the ombudsman would be to strike the right balance between farmers getting a fair deal and the aspirations of consumers. That is a good aim, with mutual benefits for all in the supply chain, and would not necessarily lead to an increase in retail prices. Although there may be additional costs associated with the establishment and operation of an ombudsman, it does not follow necessarily that that will result in an increase in the retail price of food products.

It is envisaged that the main costs will be driven largely by the number of complaints brought against a retailer. There is a tangible incentive now for supermarkets to focus on minimising the number of complaints that they receive. My hope is that the benefits to the agriculture industry of the future appointment of an ombudsman will not lead to any increase in retail prices.

Mrs M Bradley: Supermarkets are always keen to retain their profits. What steps does the Minister have in place to prevent that?

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: As I said, retail pricing is a reserved matter, and not in my remit. However, I accept the concept of fair pricing and consider that I have a role to encourage and facilitate a mutual understanding of the challenges facing each part of the food chain. I have had very interesting conversations to that end over recent years. As part of that process, I visited retailers, producers and food processors to encourage discussion of the challenges facing each part of the food chain, particularly the economic pressures on producers. All partners in the supply chain have an important role, and all need to share in the profits.

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I agree with the Minister about her fair deal proposal for farmers and retailers on

prices. In fairness, much is to do with profit at retailer level rather than across the board. Will there be fairness across the board in future if the loss of 87 jobs at a place such as Foyle Meats is caused by the fact that retailers will not pay proper prices to farmers who are at the start of the food chain? If that continues, we will not have a local industry.

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: Fair pricing is very important. Everyone in the supply chain needs to get a share of the profits, and I will continue to work to that end.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply. She spoke about sharing profit. Does she agree that it is vital that some form of regulation is involved to protect farmers? For too long they have suffered, and the profit share has not been equal throughout the sector. Will the Minister agree that that needs to be addressed, and, owing to the fact that farm size and structure are different in Northern Ireland compared with other parts of the country, what discussions has she had with the new coalition Government to make sure that representations are made?

3.30 pm

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural

Development: I met Caroline Spelman and Jim Paice last week and they are very clear about the differences between farming in Ireland and farming in Britain. The Ulster Farmers' Union in particular has been very much in support of the call for a supermarket ombudsman. The union clearly articulated the need for farmers to receive a fair return for their produce and the damaging impact that the relentless downward pressure on supplier prices has on the industry. In February, the UFU issued a news release that stated that although the new code of practice should help to achieve a fair supply chain, it will be useless unless an independent body enforces it. It urged government to make the establishment of a supermarket ombudsman a priority. It is something that we will bring up again with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers as an issue that needs to be seen as a matter of urgency.

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that, in my supplementary question, the Minister may have picked me up wrongly. I did not ask her to reconsider her position. I asked her to reconsider her position

in relation to not coming to the House with a statement.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order, but rather one of clarification. The Minister has heard it and she can respond to it on another occasion.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

SELB: Summer Schemes

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of an urgent oral question under Standing Order 20A to the Minister of Education.

Mr Savage asked the Minister of Education to account for the removal of funding for summer schemes for children with learning disabilities in the Southern Education and Library Board Area; to outline the contact that her Department has had with the Southern Education and Library Board in relation to this matter; and to detail what the Department of Education is doing as a matter of urgency to locate funding to allow these summer schemes to operate fully.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Ní fiú do Chomhaltaí teacht chun an Tionóil le cinneadh boird a cháineadh nó le iarracht a dhéanamh mise a cháineadh mar Aire mar gheall ar chinneadh boird.

There is no point in MLAs coming to the Chamber to criticise the decisions of boards or attempting to deflect their criticism of a board's decision onto me as Minister, especially when they are members of the political parties that are keeping the boards in place.

The boards are not an efficient mechanism for the management or administration of our education services. The DUP and UUP continue to block the establishment of the education and skills authority (ESA), which has been designed to ensure that the maximum amount of money is directed to front line services rather than the duplication of bureaucracy. The education and skills authority has the potential to save up to £20 million per annum with strategic rather than piecemeal savings.

These schemes are a classic example of why we do not need five boards. Each board is doing a different thing in relation to time, the length of schemes and transport. That is why this society needs the education and skills authority.

It is all very well for the Chairperson of the Education Committee to snigger and laugh, but if people are really concerned — *[Interruption]*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister has the Floor. Members know the procedure on

this type of question. Other Members, and the Chairperson of the Committee, will have opportunity to ask questions. Until that point comes, the Minister has the Floor.

The Minister of Education: If people are genuinely concerned about our special educational needs children, as I am, they will join with me and parties across the board in support of the establishment of the education and skills authority. I do not want to fund 11 human resource managers and administrative costs in many different organisations. My Department and I have brought forward very progressive proposals to ensure that we get money into the front line to help our special educational needs children. I support the ESA, and my officials have worked tirelessly to bring it forward.

I expect all education and library boards to give the highest priority to the funding of special educational needs children and their parents. Those children are the most vulnerable in our school system. They deserve their summer schemes. They should have their entire summer schemes. Their families also deserve that support.

Three boards have made that decision, and I am not going to attempt to justify poor decision-making. My Department has given significant amounts of funding to the boards. Their budgets have been reduced by a small amount and I fail to understand how they could not have found those savings from their administrative budgets rather than cutting front line services. That is an issue for the five education and library boards, particularly the three boards that have cut the schemes. I hope that they will reconsider their decision.

Mr Savage: I thank the Minister for coming here today. Does she agree with me that the decision to cut the expenditure on children with special needs in the Southern Board area is deplorable? Does she accept that there are major equality issues involved?

I am not playing politics with this issue: this is very serious. Bearing that in mind, and given that she received an urgent meeting request from me 10 days ago, will the Minister meet me and certain people involved with the issue so that we can try to get it sorted out? There is an opportunity to do something. Special needs must be treated in a special way. These are special people. The parents of those children must also be treated in a humble way. There is

an opportunity to do something to relieve the problems and situation that we have presently. These are big issues, and they must be addressed.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I have already answered the question about my opinion on the decision-making. There are equality issues here in relation to our special needs children and their family members, because their family members badly need a break.

In the first instance, it is an issue for the boards. The boards have taken those decisions, and I respectfully suggest that there should be a cross-party, all-party — not just certain people — delegation to meet the boards that have cut summer schemes. Members would rightly criticise me if I intervened where it is not my locus to intervene. Following that meeting, we will see where we can take it.

I have made it absolutely clear that those children should have their summer schemes. I have also made it clear that I expect the support of the Member's party. I accept that he is not playing politics with the issue, but the best way of dealing with such issues is to have the education and skills authority in place, where there will be cohesiveness and consistency in making decisions, and where we will not squander and waste money on the administration of boards, as we currently do, rather than spending it on front line services.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): First, before I speak as Chairperson of the Education Committee, I am extremely disappointed, as a Member, in the way that the Minister has answered the questions today. We are glad that she has actually decided to attend, but to make a political point in relation to the children who are the most vulnerable in our society is disgraceful.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Mr Storey that he is asking a question as the Chairperson of the Education Committee, not in a personal capacity.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Mr Deputy Speaker, I will also clarify that I said that I would make my opening remarks as a Member. I now ask the question —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I made it very clear that you are asking a question as the

Chairperson of the Education Committee. Mr George Savage has spoken as a private Member; you are speaking as the Chairperson of the Education Committee, and not in a personal capacity.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: As Chairperson of the Education Committee, I ask the Minister whether, in light of the issues around the summer schemes that are now in a number of areas across Northern Ireland, she is proactively examining the consequences of the cut. The Minister has a responsibility for the boards' resource allocation plans. Will the Minister and her Department accept the boards' plans that indicate those cuts? There are clearly questions around what arrangements were made to assess the equality impact of the decision; how much consultation took place with the parents and children; and how much notice was given to them of the decisions.

The Minister of Education: Go raibh maith agat as na ceisteanna sin. Thank you for those questions. I make no apology for making the point that we should use our resources wisely. I make no apology for saying that instead of having 11 organisations, we should have one. I make no apology for saying that in these tight financial times, we have to make sure that the money gets to the front line and that we do not squander it on administration, as has been happening.

It causes me concern that the Chairperson of the Education Committee does not see the link between squandering money on administration and various organisations, and the pressure on front line services. We all have responsibilities, and I am taking mine very seriously. I want to get money to front line services. I want consistency of practice right across the North of Ireland, not different practices in each board area.

My Department will, of course, liaise with boards on many different issues. On every occasion, I have made it absolutely clear to the boards that I do not want to make savings on front line services or in respect of our special needs children; I want to make them in administration. I look forward to the support of the Chairperson of the Education Committee and its members, because I assume that they share my view.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

I CAN Centre

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Speaker has received notice of a second urgent oral question under Standing Order 20A to the Minister of Education.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will not take a point of order until after the urgent oral question.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what action she will take to keep the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch open, ensuring it continues to provide intensive speech and language therapy for children with severe communication difficulties as an integrated education and health facility, following the decision on Thursday 24 June 2010 by commissioners at the South Eastern Education and Library Board not to fund the educational element; and whether the Minister will agree to an urgent meeting with an all-party delegation on the issue.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane): Tá acmhainní de £78.7 milliún tugtha ag an Roinn Oideachais do Bhord Oideachais agus Leabharlainne an Oirdheiscirt mar chuid de leithdháileadh blocdheontais óna maoiníonn an bord réimse seirbhísí.

The Department of Education has provided resources of £78.7 million to the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) as part of a block grant allocation from which the board funds a range of services. The South Eastern Education and Library Board determines its own budget priorities. Accordingly, it decided that it was not in a position to prioritise funding for the continuation of the I CAN centre in Ballynahinch.

Education and library boards have responsibility under legislation to identify and make provision for children with special educational needs in their area. It is to ensure that local needs are identified and met that such roles and responsibilities are delegated to education and library boards; they are best placed to direct funds to local provision that most effectively meets the special educational needs of children in their areas. It is a matter for the South Eastern Education and Library Board to ensure

that the special educational needs of children, including those who attend the I CAN centre, are met, in line with the board's responsibilities.

As with other education and library boards, the SEELB is required to submit a plan detailing the services that it will provide within its available resources. I share the Member's disappointment that the South Eastern Education and Library Board commissioners, following their meeting with the cross-party delegation on 24 June, claimed that they were unable to alter their earlier decision to discontinue funding for the I CAN centre.

I understand from the chief executive of the SEELB that the board has considered the funding options that were presented by the cross-party delegation, but it claims that it cannot fund those options. The commission said that it was unable to change its earlier decision. It is up to the board to allocate its block grant funding following a robust assessment of need in its area. Again, much like my answer to the previous question, I would prefer that money be taken from the administration budget than from front line services. That is my clear direction to boards.

I attended a meeting with an all-party delegation on 17 May at which I welcomed and encouraged a proposal from that delegation to convene a meeting between the South Eastern Education and Library Board, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and the Department for Social Development. Senior officials in my Department have also discussed funding of the I CAN centre with the chairperson and the chief executive of the South Eastern Education and Library Board. I have made my role in the issue clear and reiterate that I absolutely believe that front line services should not be cut. In fact, I ring-fenced funding for speech and language services in the South Eastern Education and Library Board. I do not believe that we should be cutting front line services. Administrative services should be cut.

Mr Givan: The Minister will be aware of the devastation felt by parents at the commissioners' decision and the anguish that those parents are going through because their young children will not get the assistance that they so desperately want.

I appeal to the Minister to take decisive action against the commissioners, who were put in place under direct rule and are accountable to nobody, so that those with special needs, who

do not have the ability to speak in English or, for that matter, Irish, are given the same equality of opportunity as everyone else and get a fair chance at life.

3.45 pm

The Minister, by changing the regulation, can take direct action. Will she change the current arrangement whereby a child is allocated a preschool place, money goes to that nursery school, but the child does not attend because he or she goes to the I CAN facility? The money does not follow the child. At the meeting, the commissioner said that the Minister could save the facility if she were to change the rules so that the money followed the child. I appeal to the Minister to change the rules so that those children can get their opportunity.

The Minister of Education: The most decisive action to protect front line children's services would be to establish the Education and Skills Authority.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): In a letter dated 11 May, a departmental official said that:

"The Minister will also encourage the SEELB to play its role in this and will assist them as far as she can in doing so."

What encouragement and material assistance has the Minister provided to date to SEELB in order to preserve the invaluable service that the I CAN centre affords to parents, families and, in particular, children?

The Minister of Education: I have provided £78.7 million to the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

Mr Kennedy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you review the Minister of Education's answer to the question posed by my colleague Mr Savage? The major part of the Minister's response was unsatisfactory in that it was not relevant to the direct question. Will you make a ruling in order to prevent Ministers from making ideological party broadcasts in the Chamber?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member knows fine well that the Speaker, or the Deputy Speaker, has no role to play in a Minister's response to questions asked by Members.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: On a point of order, Mr Deputy

Speaker. Do you have the power to ascertain whether the Minister was speaking from a script prepared by the Department or whether she was speaking as a member of a party rather than as the Minister of Education, because it was quite clear that she was speaking as a member —

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

Executive Committee Business

Programme for Government: Delivery Reports

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the Programme for Government delivery reports up to 31 March 2009 and 30 September 2009. — [The First Minister (Mr P Robinson).]

Dr Farry: I welcome the opportunity to debate and scrutinise the delivery of the Programme for Government. I was going to say that it affords us an opportunity to investigate accountability, but, given some of the comments so far, there is a major question mark over Ministers' practice of accountability. We are looking at a historical snapshot of where we have been, which, although useful, is limited. I fear, and most people share my trepidation, that the delivery situation in real time is worse than the historical position that we are reviewing.

That said, we have to be realistic. No Government in the world, even in the best circumstances, will have met all the targets that they set out in their equivalent of a Programme for Government. I certainly accept that we have had some changes to our economic and financial circumstances that have further limited our ability to meet Programme for Government targets.

I am somewhat concerned by the tone of the debate so far, which has included a certain amount of finger-pointing. It is worth stressing that the Programme for Government was the collective product of what were then four parties in the Executive. Obviously, that situation has changed. Indeed, implementation is also a collective duty.

The Alliance Party was not part of the process of drawing up the Programme for Government, except as being part of the wider consultation process undertaken. However, today we share the responsibility with everyone else for the implementation and delivery of the objectives. Having said that, the Alliance Party is coming from a slightly different perspective, given that it was not part of the original process. When looking at delivery, it is useful to look at the wider context; and from our perspective, the Programme for Government was limited because only some issues were covered. It was not a

comprehensive review of all of the opportunities and challenges that faced Northern Ireland nor was it a recognition of the priorities that needed to be addressed at that time. It seemed to be the case that matters were considered for inclusion in the Programme for Government where agreement was found between political parties, while others, where agreement could not be found, were, essentially, parked and sidelined.

As a consequence, there are areas in which the Programme for Government is light, and there are major areas in which the Programme for Government has nothing to say. For example, post-primary education was one of the major issues highlighted as part of the St Andrews Agreement. It has bedevilled devolution over the past three years but is not mentioned in the document, and I think that a lot of people find that bizarre.

Similarly, although some consideration is given to the economy — it is rightly given top billing in the Programme for Government — there are concerns about the detail of the associated measures. There are questions as to whether there was proper acknowledgement of all of the structural problems that faced the economy, many of which have entered into our narrative over the past number of years but were perhaps not drawn out as much as they could have been back in 2007-08.

As regards delivery, it is clear that there are two reasons why things have gone off course. There have been changes in the external environment that have made it difficult or impossible to meet the very good objectives set out originally. Also, to be frank, there are areas in which delivery has not been possible because political parties have not been able to agree. We must be self-critical and point out that devolution is seen by the public as being a mixed bag. There is an impression that the Executive and the Assembly, to be fair and balanced, are not effective at taking timely and effective decisions. We all need to reflect on that without pointing fingers in any direction.

There is also some scepticism over the public service agreement (PSA) targets, though I am not saying that we oppose the use of PSA targets per se. I understand that the new coalition Government seem to be intent on doing away with PSAs and going back to internal business plans. It is important that our

Executive make an independent decision on what is best for Northern Ireland in that regard rather than simply and slavishly following what happens at the wider UK level. The PSA target system has its uses, even though a number of concerns have been expressed over the specifics of some targets, about whether the baselines have been very clearly articulated and whether the targets are sufficiently output-focused as opposed to process-focused. We had a useful report from the Northern Ireland Audit Office setting out some of those issues.

I will make a couple of final points in relation to what I see as the key challenges that face Northern Ireland. They are reflected in the Programme for Government in respect of the productivity convergence. I welcome the progress that we have seen in that regard, albeit that it is limited by some of our external environment. I have two concerns. The first is the continued comparing of Northern Ireland to the UK average minus the greater south-east of England. Essentially, there is a danger that we are not sufficiently challenging the overall balance or lack of balance of the UK economy as a whole but are comparing ourselves to the other dependant regions. Only three of the 12 regions are net contributors to the UK Treasury. It is almost the case that we are comparing ourselves to others in respect of how well we fight for the scraps from the table. There is also the danger, in the current economic climate, of a false positive; that we close the gap in relative terms but that our situation does not improve.

Finally, in appealing to the Executive for further targets, we should try to benchmark ourselves as a region and as part of the wider European Union. The methodology exists through the NUTS (Nomenclature of Units for Territorial Statistics) targets, and we should be benchmarking ourselves in the wider context, not just a UK-wide system.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

(Mr Moutray): I rise for the first time as Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. First, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Ian Paisley Jnr, for his very positive contribution to the Committee and the agriculture industry, and I wish him well in his new role. I thank the Minister for her remarks on my appointment.

It is regrettable, in my first engagement as Chairperson of the Committee, that I have to confirm the criticisms of the Department that are contained in the two reports. Today, we heard that the Department is failing in completing its public service agreements, that it is failing in delivering on key services to the agriculture industry and that it is failing to support rural businesses. That is not a one-off, easily explained failure; it is a consistent failure and one that is steadily worsening.

In the March 2009 Programme for Government report, we saw that 50% of the targets were either red or amber: that is to say that there has been no progress against those targets. One would have thought that, at this stage, the Department would have been alert to those failings and would have taken some steps to rectify the situation. The situation is the contrary: the September 2009 report paints a bleaker picture, with 70% of the targets not progressing sufficiently. Of those, 30% are rated as critical.

On deeper investigation, we see that two of the areas that are rated as critical are reducing the bureaucratic burden on the industry, and reducing diseases such as TB and brucellosis. I will spend a little time on those issues. The September report recommends that the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) intends calling the Minister and the Department to account for their failures through a review process. It is almost as if a naughty child has been called to the headmaster's office. I say "almost" because it is too serious an issue about which to be frivolous. The Committee has received a copy of the report containing recommendations on how to reduce the administrative burden on the industry. It contains almost 90 recommendations, and the Department has accepted two thirds. However, that is where it ends. There is no indication on how or when those recommendations will be implemented; no indication of the impact of their implementation; what impact their implementation will have on the industry; and no indication of the net reduction on the administrative burden on the industry. Nothing else.

The Department will, quite rightly, claim that resources are required to implement many of the recommendations and that, understandably, those resources are not available, what with the cuts imposed on us by the new Westminster

Government, disallowances from the EU and self-imposed cuts, such as the overvaluation of Crossnacreevy. However, the Department cannot use those as an excuse to do nothing. A recent survey conducted during the Balmoral Show identified too much paperwork and bureaucracy as the main problem faced by farm businesses. It is imperative, therefore, that that burden is lifted from the industry, and that it be allowed to do what it does best, namely producing food of the highest quality without unnecessary and costly hindrances. That should be the Department's priority. I assure Members that it will be my priority to ensure that the Department does not sit back, and that it brings the recommendations contained in the report into effect promptly.

The second area that I want to mention is disease control. I put on record my abhorrence at the recent deliberate infection of cattle with brucellosis in south Armagh. I support the Minister and her officials in calling on those with information about that sickening practice to contact the Department and the police immediately. It is a threat to our industry and to our economy, and those criminals cannot be allowed to profit from such disgusting practices.

In June 2009, the Public Accounts Committee published a report on the control of bovine tuberculosis in Northern Ireland.

4.00 pm

In its report, the Committee stated:

"Spending hundreds of millions of pounds on a programme that is not explicitly aimed at the eradication of bovine TB seems an extremely poor use of taxpayers' money."

The Committee recommended that the focus be on eradication, not containment, and that the Department review its TB targets. Unfortunately, the Department did neither. It persists with a programme that has cost Northern Ireland almost £200 million over the past 10 years. The programme continues to cost £20 million each year and will cost a further £100 million before the Department is able to state whether it is even in a position to commence an eradication programme. As for the review of TB targets, the Department's response was to separate the two diseases from the target, because the failure to contain bovine TB also drags down the target for brucellosis. Therefore, the Department's response was to massage the figures.

I echo the words of my predecessor, the Committee and, most importantly, the farming industry when I say that we must stop messing around with studies and surveys. We must stop massaging figures and making poor use of taxpayers' money. We must eradicate the disease now.

I welcome the opportunity to speak today, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I assure you and the farming industry that I will continue to press the Department for improvements in the areas that I outlined.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure (Mr McElduff): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Bhí cruinniú againn mar Choiste ar an ábhar seo ar 24 Meitheamh.

At its meeting of 24 June 2010, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure considered the Programme for Government delivery report, which tracks progress up to 30 September 2009. Two departmental targets for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) fall into the red category, which means that little or no progress has been made and that their delivery will be achieved only with a significant delay, if at all.

One of those targets is the Department's goal, subject to the normal approval processes, of having an operationally viable and commercially sustainable multi-sports stadium for the North by 2011. Members will be aware that that stadium is not now proceeding. Indeed, the Minister's predecessor made that announcement some 16 months ago in February 2009. The Committee asked Minister McCausland to brief it on his assessment of the business cases for providing stadia development for Gaelic games, rugby and soccer in June 2010, but the Minister deferred that briefing until the autumn. The Committee is concerned that progress is slow and that there are still no adequate stadia facilities to meet the strategic requirements of the three sporting codes: the Gaelic Athletic Association, the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) Ulster Branch and the Irish Football Association (IFA).

The other target in the red category is the Department's goal of halting the decline in adult participation in sport and physical recreation by 2011. When the first Programme for Government delivery report was produced in June 2009, the Committee quickly picked up on

the fact that that goal was not on track and, in December 2009, agreed to undertake an inquiry into adult participation in sport and physical activity. The evidence sessions began in January 2010, and the Committee is currently finalising its report. At this stage, all the evidence points to the importance of adults undertaking five bouts of exercise lasting at least 30 minutes each week, as the Chief Medical Officer suggested to the Committee. Sport and physical activity are crucial to physical and mental health. They can also have a range of knock-on benefits for educational achievement and community cohesion and contribute to the shared and better future agenda.

The Committee welcomes the fact that 'Sport Matters: The Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation, 2009 – 2019' was launched, albeit quietly, in June 2010. However, when we take into account the fact that the draft strategy was produced in 2007, there was a considerable delay in its being approved by the Executive. Valuable time has been lost in implementing the strategy, particularly in relation to the targets for halting the decline in adult participation in sport and physical activity.

Four departmental targets fall into the category of amber, that is, where there is significant doubt about the achievement of the target outcomes in the targeted time frame. One of the targets with an amber rating is the goal of investing £110 million in our sports facilities by 2011, thereby ensuring a lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. The Committee is concerned about the serious delay in taking forward stage two of the elite facilities programme.

Another of the targets in the amber category is the goal to increase to 125,000 by 2011 the number of children and young people who participate in sport and physical recreation and to have at least a third of people with disabilities so participating by 2013. As I said, the Committee is finalising its inquiry report into the low levels of adult participation in sport and physical activity. Although our focus has been on adults, the inquiry recognises that having an active adult population relies heavily on people participating in sport and physical activity from a young age and on their continuing to do so into adulthood. The Committee was concerned to learn about the findings of a recent Sport NI survey. It found that only 17% of primary schools provide children with two hours of physical

education a week, which is the Department of Education's recommended standard.

The Committee argues that participation in sport and physical activity can be a lifeline both for people with a disability and for their families. Last Thursday, the Committee received a briefing from the Department and Sport NI on the business case that is being considered to provide core funding for Special Olympics Ulster. On a number of occasions, the Committee has met with representatives from Special Olympics Ireland and from Special Olympics Ulster. It has been greatly impressed with the work that those organisations do with athletes and their families, as well as with the knock-on benefits that such work brings for education and health. I commend Aoife Kerr, Orla McCartan, Sammy Jo Sweeney and Francie Meenagh and their coach Paul Sweeney from the Starbreakers Special Olympics Club in Carrickmore, County Tyrone for their brilliant achievements at the Special Olympics Ireland, which were held in Limerick recently.

Another target with an amber rating falls under PSA 5, which relates to tourism. The goal is to deliver £229 million of capital investment by 31 March 2011 in the culture, arts and leisure infrastructure through a programme of arts, sports, museums, libraries and PRONI capital projects. The Committee is concerned that the Department is not progressing quickly enough in those areas.

Finally, the House will know that the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure is asking the Arts Council to increase the amount of funding that it directs towards community arts and traditional arts, not least amateur drama and traditional arts, so that participation levels in artistic activity can be increased.

In conclusion, the Committee is concerned that two of the Department's targets are rated as red and four are rated as amber. It urges the Department to do all that it can during the remainder of the current Programme for Government period to ensure that those targets are met.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development (Mr Hamilton): The Committee recently considered the latest Programme for Government delivery report and reviewed in detail the Department's end-of-year position report and revised corporate plan. Along with most Committees, the Committee for Social

Development makes the best use that it can of all those documents when reviewing departmental progress against public service agreement targets.

The March delivery report indicated that certain urban regeneration projects, which are part of PSA 12, were behind schedule and were to be the subject of a review meeting. The Department for Social Development (DSD) advised the Committee of its opposition to what departmental officials termed an additional layer of bureaucracy. Perhaps, therefore, it is not surprising that the September delivery report gave limited information on the reasons for project delays other than a reference to the “prevailing economic climate”. No information was given on corrective action. Perhaps it is also not surprising that some of the projects are still running late. I hope that, in the First Minister's response to the debate, he may be able to tell the House about the effectiveness of the review meetings in securing project recovery.

I will now turn to the key PSAs and related projects that fall to the Department for Social Development. The Committee welcomed departmental progress in delivering elements of PSA 7, particularly in respect of measures to improve the recovery of child maintenance from absent parents. Members were, however, concerned about the jobs and benefits service. As the House is aware, the Social Security Agency is to reduce its staffing levels — hopefully, without redundancy — to offset the ongoing cost of the equal pay settlement. The agency must also shoulder the administrative burden of Westminster welfare reforms, including the large-scale transfer over a number of years of benefit claimants to employment and support allowance. The House can be assured that the Committee will continue to use the delivery reports and other scrutiny mechanisms to review that important aspect of the Programme for Government.

PSA 11 includes the regeneration of former military sites. The reds and ambers include the Crumlin Road/Girdwood Barracks development and the Fort George and Ebrington Barracks projects in the north-west. The delays to those projects are well publicised. The Committee for Social Development and the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which have a joint oversight role, will continue to take an active interest in those projects in respect of the understandable

sensitivities that exist and in recognition of the fact that, if developed appropriately, both sites can be great economic generators for the respective cities in which they are placed.

The delivery reports also refer to PSA 12, which includes housing and urban regeneration. The housing statistics appear to be good, and targets are, largely, on track for achievement. The Committee still wants procurement frameworks in place for social housing development so as to minimise costs and ensure value for money at every level. Given the frequent references to the neighbourhood renewal strategy in annexe 4 of the September delivery report, the Committee is eager to learn about the Department's mid-term review and improved delivery model for that strategy. I am sure that the Committee will continue its close scrutiny of the neighbourhood renewal strategy in respect of all those matters.

The reds, ambers and amber/greens for PSA 12 are associated with urban regeneration projects. As the Social Development Minister indicated in the House last week, those projects bring direct and obvious benefits to the construction industry, but they also hugely assist the economy indirectly. I hope that the Department will do all that it can to bring those important projects in on time and to cost. In the current economic difficulties, those regeneration projects may well prove to be of considerable and sustained assistance.

Mr Elliott: This is an important issue. My first point is to call into question the effectiveness of the monitoring process. Members of the OFMDFM Committee and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development will not be surprised to hear me say that some of the areas are failing. For example, the child poverty target, which has an amber rating at the moment, aims to reduce child poverty in Northern Ireland by 50% by 2010 and to eliminate it by 2020. Although it is clearly failing in those aspects, it still receives an amber rating. The same can be said for the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site, for which the master plan was scrapped and we entered a whole new process. I am not debating the rights and wrongs of that decision, but the fact that it still receives an amber rating must call into question the mechanism by which it is evaluated.

Other areas are in the same category, and I will touch briefly on a few areas. The First Minister

and Mr Moutray mentioned bovine TB. The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee got information in the June monitoring round that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development had to bid for money — about 40% of the entire budget — for bovine tuberculosis incidents. There is clearly something wrong with targets when, in the first monitoring round of the year, a Department has to bid for an additional 40% of an overall budget. We need more specific and much better organisation of those budgets and, indeed, of the Programme for Government.

4.15 pm

I am concerned as to why there has not been a review of the Programme for Government, particularly given the current fiscal climate. We have huge pressures on our finances. That issue has come before the House on many occasions over recent months, and I am concerned as to why we have not had a more substantive review of the entire Programme for Government, given the times that we are in.

Looking at the target of generating £300 million of capital realisations by 2011 and approximately £1 billion by 2018, we have to ask whether those targets are actually limiting the Executive's movement in that area. That is why the Executive and Departments would benefit from a review. We have heard from a number of Committee Chairpersons, and it would give them the opportunity to look at those areas afresh. My colleague Mr Kennedy has referred to the child poverty issue, and I know from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister that a review mechanism is clearly needed. I do not know whether it is right to change the targets. I am reluctant to ask for targets to be changed, but we need a review of how we realise them. Without a review, the Departments will suffer, because they will not be able to achieve their targets, some of which may be unrealistic. My big query is why we cannot have a fundamental review of the Programme for Government and bring it to the House as soon as is reasonably possible.

Mr McDevitt: The Programme for Government was hailed as a document that would put the economy at the heart of everything that we would do in this region during its tenure, yet when one looks at the performance and all the key economic indicators within it, it is poor. In

PSA 1, which relates to productivity growth, 17 out of the 27 objectives are not on target. In PSA 3, which relates to employment growth, seven out of the 12 objectives are not on target. PSA 5 relates to tourism, which is a key foundation stone of economic growth in this region, yet five out of six objectives are not on target.

I suppose that that is not a surprise given that Professor Richard Barnett from the panel for the independent review of economic policy already found that there was no connection between what we have said on paper and what we have done in reality. However, it is very sad to see that as early as September 2009, before the very people who brought the report to the Assembly acknowledged that we are in the heart of a deep and significant recession, the performance was already so off target that most of its self-declared indicators would be missed.

Looking across other portfolio areas, such as my own area of responsibility in regional development, it is interesting to note that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) has met most of its targets according to the Programme for Government, yet the reality on the ground is very different. For example, a pledge was made some years ago that 35% of all money invested in transport in this region would go into public transport, yet today we are struggling to achieve 12% or 13%. We have bought a lot of buses and ticked the box in the Programme for Government, we have bought some new trains and that has ticked another box in the Programme for Government, but traffic and journey times on all our key arterial routes have not reduced. In fact, there are 17% more cars on all our arterial routes today than there were at the beginning of the Programme for Government.

The same is true of car ownership. The objective was meant to be to get people out of their cars and to reduce our car dependency. Yet, car ownership is at an all-time high and continues to grow. Furthermore, average bus speeds were meant to be increased by 15%. However, they are slower today than they were at the turn of the noughties. Buses travel more slowly in this city than they did 10 years ago. Therefore, we have a problem. How can you meet your targets and fail your objectives? It is an important issue. How can you meet your targets and not improve the quality of life of the people whom those targets are meant to serve? That can happen in two ways: either Departments fiddle

their targets, or they do not understand what they are meant to be doing. I am not sure whether that is due to unwillingness, inability or a combination of both.

The truth is that the Programme for Government is presiding over growing inequalities. Transport inequalities, for example, mean that someone who does not own a car will be worse off today than someone who does own a car. Members mentioned health inequalities, so I will not rehearse them. There are also inequalities in income differentials. All the PSA targets to address inequalities in earnings between men and women, for example, are being missed.

What can be taken from that? Only that, although much money is being spent, and people have been busy writing many policies, those policies are not having their intended effect or were written simply to pay lip service to someone else's agenda.

In the real world, there is no confidence in the Executive's work. As other Members said, there is also little confidence in the Assembly's work. When I read the delivery reports, I wonder whether the public are, in fact, talking sense when we meet them in the street and they criticise the Assembly.

It is worth noting a couple of other matters. As I said at the start of my contribution, the Programme for Government is about putting the economy at the heart of everything that the Assembly wants to do. However, despite having spent more than £100 million on capital projects, DRD created only eight jobs under social clauses for the long-term unemployed. Again, the objective was noble, but the Assembly failed to meet it.

Ms Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will, of course, give way. I will get an extra minute added to my time.

Ms Anderson: I accept what the Member said about DRD and social clauses. However, does he also acknowledge the fact that, with regard to the social requirements that must be built into procurement contracts at the stage at which they go to the European Union to be awarded a tender, DRD is the only Department that currently places those social requirements into procurement contracts? Much social housing work is being done throughout the North, but social requirements have not been built into any

contracts that have so far gone to Europe from the Minister for Social Development.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I wonder how much of the extra minute I will be allowed to use.

I do not accept the Member's intervention. I believe that she will find that social clauses have worked in the development of the Titanic Quarter. It is a question of showing genuine leadership, intent and determination to match the commitment that is on paper in the Programme for Government with actions on the ground.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel (Ms J McCann): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On the Committee's behalf, I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate on the Executive's Programme for Government delivery reports for 2008-09 and for April 2009 to September 2009. Some Members already pointed out, and expressed their disappointment, that we are debating a report for 2008-09 one full year after it was presented to the Assembly and that the full-year report for 2009-2010 is not yet available for our consideration.

The Committee's interest in delivery reports is threefold. First, the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) is a business area in DFP that monitors departmental returns on expenditure and delivery of Programme for Government goals and PSA targets alongside counterparts in OFMDFM. Members continue to monitor PEDU's work with interest.

Secondly, the Committee takes seriously its responsibility to scrutinise the performance of DFP against its PSA targets and related business plan objectives. In June 2009, while scrutinising DFP's performance against PSA targets and departmental business objectives for 2008-09, the Committee was alarmed to note significant discrepancies between the Department's own assessment of its achievements and those reported in the end-of-year delivery report.

I want to give the House two examples. A DFP target to roll out a single-telephone-number point of contact to all remaining Civil Service Departments and agencies on a phased basis

from October 2009 onwards was awarded green status by the Department and reported as being on track for achievement. However, the end-year delivery report recorded the status as amber, which indicates that there is significant doubt about whether that outcome can be achieved within the target time frame.

Similarly, the target of full implementation of the delivery of human resources services through HR Connect by November 2008 was reported by the Department as being substantially achieved, although the end-year delivery report recorded it as having red status, signalling that the delivery of the targeted outcome is likely to be achieved but with significant delay. Although those discrepancies have largely been addressed in the latest six-monthly report, the Committee wants to place on record its ongoing concern that PSA targets continue to be awarded a green status when target dates for completion have clearly been missed, often by a significant period.

Finally, in the wider context, the Committee has a remit to consider strategic and cross-cutting public finance issues. It is now time for the Executive to urgently review their Programme for Government so that they can clearly set out the services and policies that must receive the highest priority in the upcoming period of further budgetary savings and efficiencies.

What I am saying today is not new. In June 2007, on behalf of DFP, the consultants PKF published a review of forecasting and monitoring of financial information in the Civil Service. The report recommended a more transparent link between inputs and outputs to enable the setting of Budgets that are better linked to performance targets. In recent weeks, the Audit Office published a good practice efficiency checklist that recommends a priority-based approach to budgeting and spending. In its 2007 report on the Executive's draft Budget 2008-2011, the Committee recommended closer alignment between the revised Budget and the revised Programme for Government. Specifically, it called for more visible linkages between Programme for Government priorities and goals, PSA objectives and the allocations, departmental objectives and spending areas in the Budget.

It is clear that that aspiration has not been met in the 2008-2011 Budget and Programme for Government period. Indeed, the lack of timely

information by way of delivery reports further hinders effective scrutiny. For example, the Assembly recently approved the Main Estimates for 2010-11. However, as Members, we were unable to judge the Estimates in the context of prior departmental performance as we did not have the proper information.

The Committee's recent report on its inquiry into public sector efficiencies and its forthcoming report on the Budget scrutiny process are also relevant to today's debate. In its report on public sector efficiencies, the Committee noted that the current Programme for Government and PSA framework is cumbersome and overly complex at a time when priorities must be reconsidered because of exceptional budgetary constraints.

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

Perhaps the delay in the publication of the delivery reports is a further indication that the whole process requires simplification. The need to simplify the monitoring of performance is also expressed in the guidance issued by the British Treasury in advance of the spending review, which is due to be completed in the autumn. It has ended what it calls a:

"complex system of Public Service Agreements".

The guidance states that the new approach will include:

"the publication of departmental business plans showing the resources, structural reforms and efficiency measures that they will need to be put in place to protect and improve the quality of key frontline services while spending less."

We are now entering a new Budget process that will establish spending priorities for the next four years. The autumn spending review will provide further clarity on where the greatest pressures will fall. Greater linkages between the Budget allocations and government priorities, along with the provision of more timely and consistent information, will not only enable us to assess performance more accurately but will provide better outcomes for our constituencies and the communities that we represent.

Mr Spratt: I apologise to the First Minister for not being in the Chamber when he spoke earlier. I was at a meeting in Belfast city centre and was unable to be here.

4.30 pm

Since I came into the Chamber, a couple of issues have been raised on which I, as a member of the OFMDFM Committee, would like to comment. The Committee did considerable work on child poverty. I listened to what Mr Elliott had to say about the targets that have been set to reduce child poverty by 50% in 2010 and to eradicate it by 2020. Given the economic situation, those targets will be difficult to achieve. It would be good for the Executive to re-examine the agreed targets, because their achievement is now, probably, impossible.

Mr Elliott also raised the issue of the amber light against the target for the Maze/Long Kesh site. There has been criticism in the press about the amount of money that has been spent on Maze/Long Kesh. On the past two or three occasions on which officials have addressed the Committee about that site, it was clear that a substantial amount of money had been spent on demolition and that a considerable amount of work had been done on decontaminating the site. Perhaps the First Minister could expand on that. The criticism of OFMDFM is unjustified. My clear understanding of what the officials said is that all that work was necessary to make the site more valuable for any future sale. It is easy for other parties to sit and criticise. In fact, some parties, which are represented in the Executive, want to do so regularly.

The issues, such as those that I mentioned in connection with the Maze/Long Kesh site, must be clarified. I understand that the site is now much more valuable, because of the amount of work that has been done. Perhaps that is why there is an amber light against that target.

I listened to Mr McDevitt's fairly substantial rant a few minutes ago. Perhaps the Executive should set a new PSA target to stop people buying cars, because, according to what Mr McDevitt said in the Chamber a short time ago, that is a problem that creates another problem.

It is easy to criticise, but the current economic situation creates additional problems for the Executive. I am keen to hear what the First Minister has to say in his response about the Maze/Long Kesh site and child poverty.

The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment (Mr Boylan): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment

Committee's views on the delivery to date of the Programme for Government. Over the past year, the Environment Committee has been closely monitoring the Department of the Environment's delivery of the public service agreements for which it has responsibility. The Department has lead responsibility for two of the 23 PSAs in the Programme for Government: PSA 14, which deals with promoting safer roads; and PSA 22, which deals with protecting our environment and reducing our carbon footprint. The Department also provides input into PSA 20, which deals with improving public services, and for which DFP has lead responsibility.

Today, I will concentrate on the two PSAs for which the DOE has lead responsibility, but I remind the House that the Department of the Environment is responsible for three goals that are contained in the body of the Programme for Government. The first of those is to make decisions on all large-scale investment planning proposals within six months, provided that there has been pre-application consultation — we are all aware of the economic situation and the downturn that we face. The second goal is to strengthen the protection of key habitats and species by declaring 200 new areas of special scientific interest by 2016, and the third is to reduce landfill significantly by creating a network of new waste treatment facilities at council level by 2011.

When the Environment Committee first asked the Department for an update in June 2009, it was advised that five of the six indicators for promoting safer roads were in the green category, and one was in the red category. Apparently, the lack of progress on the indicator in the red category arose as a result of difficulties in introducing compulsory basic training for motorcyclists. The Committee noted lack of progress with that indicator at quarterly intervals throughout the year and was advised in April that it would be December 2010 before compulsory basic training for motorcyclists is in place. The Committee is disappointed that that PSA indicator remains in the red category.

The Department also has responsibility for PSA 22, which deals with protecting the environment and reducing carbon footprints. The Committee saw a much more worrying picture of this PSA target when it first examined the indicators in June 2009. Of the 15 indicators, only seven were categorised as green, with three described as green/amber, a category that the Committee

had considerable concerns about, as it was introduced after the system was established and appeared to allow Departments to describe progress on their indicators much more optimistically than previously. Four indicators were deemed amber, and one was red. The Department told the Committee that the red indicator was due, in part, to delays in ongoing legal proceedings in relation to a judicial challenge to the environmental report for the draft northern area plan, which was preventing the production of a fit-for-purpose suite of development plans by March 2011. Another reason given was the delays to the wider programme of planning reform.

In June 2009, the Department advised the Committee that the overarching commitment to reduce landfill significantly by creating new waste treatment facilities at council level was also considered to be in the red category. Apparently, that was due largely to the indication from the waste management groups that they may not meet their April 2012 target of having the required infrastructure in operation.

The four amber ratings for indicators of PSA 22 were related to greenhouse gas emissions, the sustainable development action plan, key air pollutants under the air quality strategy and the legislative programme for the reform of planning. That was a year ago, in June 2009. Where are we now? Unfortunately, the situation appears to have deteriorated. Now, instead of seven indicators identified as green, there are only six. Where there was one red indicator, there are now two.

In addition to the ongoing lack of development plans, there is the failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the set targets. That cannot be described as progress. The Department explained that the delivery of the greenhouse gas emissions indicator depends on many Departments, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), OFMDFM and DFP, and suggests that the many variables and contributory policies make it difficult to identify a line of accountability for the overall target.

Similarly, the target to deliver strategic climate change and energy objectives through the sustainable development implementation plan has been given an amber rating. Presumably, that is because an implementation plan has still to be finalised that is outside the DOE's

area of responsibility. That highlights one of the Environment Committee's key concerns and is why I am pleased to participate in this debate. The Committee accepts that there is a limit to what the Department of the Environment can do in an isolated position on issues such as cost-cutting and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. There is collective responsibility for those issues. If I have one message from the Environment Committee, it is the need for collective responsibility to be taken on cross-cutting issues.

Finally, I wish to note another concern that was raised by the Committee for the Environment in relation to the monitoring of PSAs. As I said earlier, the Committee asked for regular updates on the status of the Department of the Environment's PSA indicators. Based on the submission received, it would appear that that is largely a self-monitoring system. Each Department assesses where it is in relation to its targets and reports those findings to OFMDFM. Although I understand that there may be some quibbling about the final shade of target, there is no independent assessment of actual delivery of outcome.

I will finish by suggesting that perhaps we should spend more time after today's debate considering what mechanism might be adopted to address the delivery of cross-cutting issues, and how a more objective approach to monitoring PSAs might be introduced. Perhaps Assembly Committees could play a role in that.

The First Minister (Mr P Robinson): I thank all colleagues who made a contribution to the debate. I will attempt to respond to as many as possible of the issues that were raised before the time runs out. It might be worthwhile to remind Members of the purpose of the reporting system. It alerts Ministers to each of the targets that have been set and where they stand in relation to those. Of course, because we are dealing with reports that have been worked up over some time, they are never completely up to date, nor should that be expected, but they allow the Committees and Ministers to make an assessment.

After a report is issued, there may well have been changes in circumstances that would cause an amber indicator during the course of the review to have moved one way or the other, so people should not express surprise

because their assessment of where things are is different from that of the report.

I agree with the Member for North Down who said that there has been a bit of finger pointing during the course of the debate. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, the finger pointing is always at the Ministers from other parties. It appears that there are understandable reasons why the Ministers from Members' parties have not been able to attain targets, but the reasons why other Ministers have not been able to achieve them are not just as understandable. We need some balance when we look at those issues. Remember that the Programme for Government means that it is not just the responsibility of an individual Minister to achieve the targets that he or she has been set; those targets are the collective responsibility of the Executive, and they have been endorsed by the Assembly.

There was a form of hand-washing and wringing of hands by the Member for South Belfast as if those policies were imposed by some alien from outer space. Those policies were endorsed by his party and its representative on the Executive.

Mr McDevitt: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: Do I get an extra minute if I do? If not, the Member has no chance. There are a lot of Members to respond to, and I will certainly respond to his comments, because I regarded them as among the most unnecessarily negative.

The Member for Newry and Armagh and the Member for Foyle raised issues on behalf of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I share their concern on the need to take forward actions to address severe child poverty and to resolve the issue of its definition. Work is being progressed to produce a child poverty strategy by March 2011.

I noted the comment on victims and survivors. I remind Members that the strategy for victims and survivors was published in December 2009. The aim is to secure an improvement in the well-being of victims and survivors, and a new victims' and survivors' service will be established shortly. The issue of the cost of that report has been raised. I can confirm that those reports have been produced by officials, and that consultants have not been involved. I am sure that the House will welcome that.

The point that was raised by the Member for Foyle in respect of the need to do more to reduce suicide rates is being discussed by officials, and we will give it the utmost priority. She will not expect me to accept her interpretation of the Executive's decision not to proceed with the review of public administration in relation to local government at this time. I think that there was unanimity in the Executive that savings need to be made. However, I do not agree with the Member's assessment that £400 million could have been saved and that, therefore, if we wanted to make savings to deal with the cuts, that would have been a natural route to take.

4.45 pm

The position is that the assessment had been made that £430 million could be saved over a 20-year period, but that could be done only if certain steps, such as setting up the single waste authority and the business organisation, were taken. However, various parties in the House, but not mine, were not prepared to take those steps. Therefore, the savings that were identified could not necessarily have been made in the way that had been identified in the report.

On top of that, a cost was attached to the issue. Approximately £140 million would have been required upfront. Therefore, over the three-year CSR period, which is when we will be hit most by cuts, there would have been expenditure on the change in local government, rather than on the benefits that would have come after that period. It was for that reason and for that reason alone that those changes were not made. Although there has been disagreement elsewhere, all our parties at least agreed on the model that we would use to move forward. There is no political disagreement about the need for such changes to be made. However, financial issues were at stake where that matter was concerned.

My colleague Mervyn Storey, the Chairperson of the Education Committee, suggested that the indicators that were used to measure PSA 10 and PSA 19 were largely on track for achievement, but he expressed concern about whether that would be the case in reality. The monitoring process and reports are designed to address those issues through evidenced-based reporting and independent central challenge functions. The benefits of those kinds of reports are such that Mr Storey can raise those issues in Committee and question the Minister on

the progress that has been made on each. This is an Executive document that is for the benefit not only of Ministers but very much of Committees. If Mr Storey has any doubts about whether the Education Minister can meet her targets, he will see that, based on what is in the report, the evidence is there for him to make the inquiries and for the Department to be able to give the necessary responses. That is part of the value of the documentation that is available.

I am not sure whether the Member for North Antrim Declan O'Loan was speaking on behalf of the SDLP or the new Sinn Féin/SDLP body that he is setting up. However, he expressed concern about time lags on reports. There is a time lag between gathering, analysing and challenging data and then reporting on the outcome. We are continually seeking to see how we can improve that service. The example of discrepancies demonstrates the value of the delivery reports, because the central team, consisting of OFMDFM and DFP officials, challenges Departments on whether targets have been achieved. We have lively debates at the Executive, where Ministers can challenge whether the assessments are accurate. The delivery reports contain the assessments that the central team and Departments agreed. That is also an example of the value of those delivery reports in helping Committees to assess Departments' work.

Mr McDevitt, a Member for South Belfast, who reported negatively on the PSA targets, almost seems to have forgotten that a recession occurred after the Programme for Government was set. I suspect that any Government anywhere in the free world that set and then assessed their Programme for Government would have recognised that they had not been able to achieve their targets because of the impact of the recession. Instead of the negative comments that he made — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: I wonder why the Member did not tell us that the Executive had delivered some 5,853 new jobs from inward investment against a three-year target of 6,500. In two years, 5,853 jobs were delivered, as opposed to the three-year target of 6,500. Why did he not tell us that the Executive have secured new foreign direct investment projects, 87% of which have been located close to areas of economic disadvantage? Why did he not tell

the Assembly that, in the same period, support had been provided for 30 start-ups exporting outside the United Kingdom? Why did he not tell the Assembly that there had been increased broadband coverage, with further work planned to increase the availability of broadband speeds to 85% of businesses by 2011? Why did he not tell us that the Executive have secured some 9.2% of electricity consumption from renewable energy resources? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

The First Minister: Why he did not tell the Assembly that the Executive have increased knowledge transfer activity from local universities? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, will you take your seat please.

The First Minister: Why he did not tell the Assembly that the Executive have enabled over 28,000 adult learners to complete a recognised qualification in essential skills and why he did not tell the Assembly that the Executive have successfully delivered accredited education and training programmes to over 3,000 people in the agrifood sector.

Of course, a Member can go around picking out the negative aspects of the report and close their eyes completely to all the positive elements. The Member did that despite the fact that he is a member of a party — I think he still is — that was party to the Programme for Government that was agreed by the Assembly. Therefore, he should be articulating the positive, rather than being the —

Mr McDevitt: Will the First Minister give way?

The First Minister: I do not have the time to give way or I would do so gladly, because there is much more that I would like to say about the Member's remarks, particularly his accusation that his ministerial colleagues in his party are fiddling targets and do not know what they are at. Any accusation that the Member makes about the issues in general, he makes about his own Minister. His party leader was Minister for most of the period, and I wonder how she will take that accusation of fiddling targets.

I congratulate my colleague the Member for Upper Bann on his post as Chairman of the Agriculture Committee. On his first outing on the Committee's behalf, he, along with the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, raised

the issue of TB control. The Department has indicated that it will continue to implement TB control programmes. To maximise the effectiveness of those programmes and to improve their delivery, the Department's Veterinary Service is actively engaging with service providers. Additional resources have been made available for writing instructions for staff and for private veterinary practitioner (PVP) supervision. Work continues on improving programme delivery, and the work on staff instructions and PVP supervision started in September 2009. The Veterinary Service is working closely with PVP representatives and will shortly commence rewriting the PVP contract. Those actions are in line with Public Accounts Committee and Northern Ireland Audit Office recommendations.

I hope that the Member will take account of all that I have said, but not ask me any questions on it. As a Member for East Belfast, I have already exceeded my knowledge of agricultural issues.

On behalf of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, its Chairman made reference to the issue of stadia. We are in the final stages of considering proposals from the three governing bodies in relation to their strategic needs. The Executive will look at the outcome of the Budget and at the envelope that, it has been indicated, will be available for the next three years of the CSR. Against that backcloth, we will look at the timing of our proposals.

A number of Members suggested that it might be proper that we look again at the Programme for Government and whether we should consider bringing out a new one. I understand that it would be an easy way forward for us to change our Programme for Government and to reduce our targets. If we changed the Programme for Government, we could have green and amber all over our documentation. However, our outlook, values and ambitions have not changed. Therefore, there is very little in the Programme for Government that we would want to dump. Obviously, when we look at the Budget, it will have to be changed in line with the new restrictions that will be applied, and that will have consequences for what we can achieve in our Programme for Government.

The Chairman of the Committee for Social Development referred to the impact of the review meetings. In each of the five areas that have been included in the review, steps have

been made to take action that gets us further along the line of meeting the necessary targets. The emergency Budget announced by the Chancellor will have a significant impact on what remains of the comprehensive spending review and its associated targets.

Although good, steady progress has been made, we are assured of a demanding period ahead. Many of the targets that are on track to be achieved depend on continuing investment, and we will have to weigh up the benefits of delivering our Programme for Government targets against the investment needed to do so. We must determine whether progress to date is sufficient, or whether we should continue to push forward at a pace, and in the direction, that we originally planned.

I regret that I am unable to respond to all the points that were made. I promise that I will provide a written response to Members to whom that applies. It is important that every Member of every party and all Ministers do everything possible to deliver on the targets that we set.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the Programme for Government delivery reports up to 31 March 2009 and 30 September 2009.

Private Members' Business

Schools: Attendance

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

Mr Beggs: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the high number of children whose attendance rate at school is less than 85 and that, in some areas, up to four tenths of children have an attendance rate below 85 ; further notes that absence from school will reduce the likelihood of children reaching their full educational potential, will limit their future job opportunities and could contribute to cycles of deprivation; and calls on the Minister of Education to detail the specific action she has taken or plans to take to address this pressing issue.

My interest in children's issues dates back over a decade to when I identified educational underachievement and high levels of suspension and absenteeism in small pockets of my East Antrim constituency. I helped to establish the Carrickfergus children's locality group, and, subsequently, Horizon Sure Start, which supports parents with children in the 0-4 age group in parts of Carrickfergus and Larne. I declare an interest as a member of those groups, which try to enable more children and young people to reach their full potential.

A pupil is referred to the educational welfare service when his or her attendance drops below 85%. It is difficult for children who miss one day in seven — the figure of 85% represents regularly missing one day in seven — to stay with the rest of their classmates.

After the Northern Ireland Audit Office report in 2004, information on those absent from school started to be collected through the Department of Education's Classroom 2000 (C2k) project. It enables statistics by council and ward area throughout Northern Ireland to be presented as per the answers to my Assembly questions for written answer AQW 970/10, AQW 971/10 and AQW 972/10. I urge every Member to examine how that impacts on their local area.

Of all council areas, Belfast has the poorest level of attendance in the 15- to 17-year-old

age group. All Members will be concerned at the levels of educational outcome in parts of Belfast. In Belfast, an average of 167 young people per 1,000 has an attendance rate of lower than 85%. The figures in Cookstown and Moyle are 160 and 149, respectively.

However, at individual ward level, there are some alarming figures behind the details. In Belfast's The Mount ward, for example, the attendance rate of 461 per 1,000 — almost half the children — is lower than 85%. In the Woodstock ward, the figure is 437 per 1,000, and in the Island ward, it is 423 per 1,000. In Northland ward, Carrickfergus, which is in my constituency, the figure is 454 children per 1,000, and in Craigavon's Tavanagh ward, the figure is 423 children per 1,000.

Four out of 10 young children in those wards attend school less than 85% of the time. Children who do not attend school will not progress and do not have a rosy future.

5.00 pm

If we reduce that ratio to three children out of 10 with less than 85% attendance, I could highlight wards in Ards, Castlereagh, Coleraine, Cookstown, Larne, Limavady, Moyle and Newtownabbey, and a threshold of two children out of 10 with less than 85% attendance identifies wards from every council area in Northern Ireland.

The Employment and Learning Committee is rightly taking an interest in children who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs), and it is clear that that problem starts at school. If regular attendance is not achieved at school, how can we expect young people suddenly to begin regularly attending employment or training courses? Such young people will have difficulty in holding down a place.

The problem can be traced to post-primary school pupils. There is a particular problem in Belfast: wards such as Shaftsbury and The Mount have 423 young people in the post-primary age category per thousand with attendance records of less than 85%. If we adopt the ratio of three children out of 10, I could identify wards from Ards, Ballymena, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Coleraine, Cookstown, Larne, Lisburn, Moyle and Newtownabbey.

Absenteeism is an issue even at primary school. The primary school figures in the response to

Assembly question for written answer 970/10 show a pattern of poor attendance in Belfast. In The Mount and Woodvale wards one in seven primary school pupils has poor attendance. The problem of absenteeism starts at primary school and worsens as pupils grow older.

Poor school attendance may be explained by genuine illness, but it may also highlight problems — bullying, problems at home or in the family, or mental health problems — which is why parenting support is so important. The sooner problems are identified, the sooner they can be addressed. There is a close relationship between high levels of absenteeism and areas of need. That is easily apparent from the NISRA indices.

The website of the Department of Children, Schools and Families shows that there are strong links between persistent truancy and poor life chances. Only 8% of truants achieve five or more GCSEs above grade C, and about one third have no qualifications whatever. Consequently, truants are more likely to be unemployed after leaving school. There are also important links with crime, with research by the Youth Justice Board showing that two thirds of truants admit to having committed a crime within the previous 12 months, many while actually truanting.

Other ideas suggested for improving attendance include behaviour improvement programmes and fast-track prosecutions for parents who actively condone their children's truancy. I hope that this debate will make parents more aware of the importance of attendance at school. I favour the supportive approach; it is the best. However, in hardened cases where parents condone absenteeism, penalties are appropriate. A headmaster told me that, where parents are content with their children's absence from school, there is a need for a speedier process and greater powers of enforcement for the authorities.

One of the goals of the Programme for Government was to end child poverty by 2010; we heard it discussed in the previous debate. That target has been moved back to 2020. Members should remember that the teenagers of today will be the parents of tomorrow. Of the 40,000 16-to-21-year-olds who are neither in employment, education or training, it is expected that half will be parents by 2020. How will we achieve our objectives? Absenteeism is

a critical issue, and education is the greatest tool that we have to allow people to progress, gain employment and avoid child poverty. If we want to increase chances of employment and minimise child poverty, we must address absenteeism at all levels.

How has the Minister addressed the issue? She seems fixated with the Irish language and with the ideological obsession that all the world's ills are created by selection at 11. If the Minister is to achieve her objective of allowing every child to reach their educational potential, she appears to have overlooked absenteeism. It should be a clear priority for her. It is a key issue that will have to be addressed if our children are to reach their potential.

I will advise Members why I am so passionate about the issue; it is because of my family history. My grandfather, on my dad's side, started work in Kilpatrick's bleach green on Green Road, Ballyclare at the age of 15. He worked there for some 55 years. He was one of 12 children, and the family lived in a two-up two-down house. By any measure, they were on the poverty line, but because of a supportive family who valued education and had a good work ethos, they all prospered and contributed to society. I want the same opportunity for children today. That is why educational opportunities and parental support through programmes such as Sure Start are so important to me. It is why I value education, and why we must encourage our young people and address the reasons for their not being at school.

The educational welfare service is a Cinderella service. It really needs the co-operation of a whole range of services: social services, health services, the Youth Justice Agency and local communities. I am aware that there is an integrated service working for children and young people in the Shankill and west Belfast area. We spend £3,000 on each child, but many children are not at school. That is not good enough.

Children who are not at school are at risk of offending, which is something that we want to avoid. There are key lessons to be learned from around the world, particularly from Chicago, where Tim Shanahan addressed the problem of failing schools. He improved literacy rates by more than 30% in one year and identified two key issues: the amount of time a child spends

in school, and the need for two hours of literacy lessons in primary schools every day.

When will the Minister address the critical issue of absenteeism? When will it be given the attention that it deserves? We look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say. I ask for Members' support in this critical issue.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education (Mr Storey): Frequent non-attendance means that children miss important schoolwork and disrupt their lessons. I agree with the legal duty and responsibility on parents and education and library boards to ensure regular attendance at school. I commend the Members for tabling the motion, as even the Education Committee has not addressed the subject directly.

I want to use the Committee's recent visit to nurture groups in three primary schools to set some context for this very important matter. As Chairperson of the Education Committee, I give the commitment that we will consider the issue following on from this debate. I will bring it to the Committee this week.

As I said, the Education Committee visited three nurture groups in primary schools across Northern Ireland in Londonderry, Warrenpoint and Coleraine. Approximately 16 schools offer nurture education in Northern Ireland, including at least one post-primary school. They provide a safe and secure environment and literally create a nurturing environment for pupils whose wider experience may be chaotic and disturbing so that they can begin to see that school is a place where they can experience success.

The Nurture Group Network provided the Committee with information on 20 pupils who were at risk of suspension prior to placement in a nurture unit. Only one of those pupils, all of whom were at stage 2 or 3 of the special educational needs (SEN) statementing process at the start of their nurture placement, was eventually suspended. That is progress. In a post-primary school, evidence was provided to the Committee by the Nurture Group Network that, across a sample of 38 pupils, there was an average 5% improvement in attendance following placement in a nurture group. That intervention, programme, set of criteria and initiative have had an effect. The Committee has repeatedly heard widespread support for the view that early intervention with primary or

pre-primary-age children is much more effective than intervention at post-primary level.

It might be expected that it would be more possible to achieve a 5% improvement in average attendance for post-primary pupils the earlier that a nurture group intervention occurs. Good attendance habits would be created, which would stay with a pupil throughout their school career. Therefore, the Committee was impressed with the work of the group that it visited on 16 June. The Committee has also repeatedly pressed the Minister to find resources in the existing SEN allocation to invest in sustaining nurture group expertise, pending possible funding on foot of the Department's SEN proposals.

I will conclude by speaking as a private Member. The proposer of the motion is right to identify the issue of poor attendance at school, particularly in areas facing socio-economic problems. The correlation between those socio-economic circumstances and poor school attendance is no coincidence. The Minister is aware that we have repeatedly asked her — via questions, letters and debates in the House — what she is doing about underachievement, particularly in light of her Department's study on underachievement in cities across the United Kingdom, which clearly identified that there was an issue of underachievement among working-class Protestant boys.

Before she contributes to the debate, I appeal to the Minister: please do not give us the usual mantra of, "It is all the fault of not having ESA". Perhaps she will use an ash cloud from another part of the world as an excuse, or blame Drumcree, but please, Minister, do not blame the problem on anyone other than the Department that has responsibility for —

Mr McCallister: Does the Member not think that he is being overly optimistic?

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Well, in this job one must have a degree of optimism; otherwise one would despair. The comments in Saturday morning's 'Belfast Telegraph' indicate that it is not only Members of this House who have an issue with the Minister opposite, her lack of leadership and her inability to deliver on these issues. Clearly, the greater community have an issue with that.

Minister, is it within your ability and remit to give some direction to the Assembly today on the

issue of non-attendance of children at school? It could be an example of a matter over which you have some control, to prove to the House that you can do something constructive.

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

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: The Minister's normal approach in the Assembly is to blame everybody else and not to deliver in her role as Minister of Education. I support the motion.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will speak in favour of the motion.

It is rich for the Chairperson of the Education Committee to call on the Minister for clarity and direction on this issue. I do not remember the Chairperson ever mentioning absenteeism in the Committee. Perhaps he will do so on Wednesday.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: Will the Member give way?

Mrs O'Neill: No; the Member has had his opportunity to speak.

If children are not attending school, it is obvious that we must get to the bottom of why that is the case. We need to establish whether there are underlying causes or problems that lead to their non-attendance. It may be that school is not interesting enough for those children and they do not feel stimulated, or it may be related to social problems. We must look at all those issues.

Parents are a key component in ensuring strong links with a child's education. When a child starts school, three key players are involved: the child, the school and the parents or guardians. Schools need to perform their role by being proactive on attendance policies from when a child starts at school, because that is when patterns start to form and it is the best time to reach out to children. Parents need to get more involved in their child's education by encouraging them to learn and to do their homework. Parents must fully understand why it is important for their child to be at school every day.

We can take it for granted that optimal attendance at school is necessary for a child to reach his or her full potential. Continual absences would lead to a child missing out on key aspects of the curriculum, which would

hold a child back, as Roy Beggs said when he proposed the motion. When it comes to personal development, it holds a child back if they are constantly behind and catching up on the parts of the curriculum that they have missed.

5.15 pm

The motion notes that a child's continual absence from school:

"will limit their future job opportunities and could contribute to cycles of deprivation".

Perhaps the Minister will clarify the issues that her Department has encountered in trying to break cycles of deprivation and habits of continual absence. Perhaps she will also advise Members about any studies that her Department has carried out in that area.

Tackling underachievement is at the core of the Minister's vision for education, and I look forward to her taking forward her policies to tackle absenteeism.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased to contribute to the debate, and I thank the Members who brought the issue before the House. Poor school attendance is an important matter that we should all take extremely seriously. The end of the school year is an appropriate time to review the situation, and I see that the rain has started on cue.

Good school attendance is essential to pupils' making good progress with their studies, and it is especially important to pupils in the early part of their school lives or to those preparing for examinations. It is important to all pupils at all stages of their development at school. In the House, we have frequently extolled the virtues of early identification and intervention in education and health matters, and school attendance can also benefit greatly from that approach. The earlier poor attendance patterns are identified, the earlier a suitable intervention can be formulated to ensure that pupils return quickly to a positive pattern.

Issues giving rise to poor attendance can emanate from the home, school or individual child. That means that early intervention and identification is most effective when a partnership exists between home, school and the education or, indeed, health authority. When those bodies work to support a family and

child to ensure that the issues that prevent regular attendance are addressed as early as possible in a child's school life, the greater the success that they meet. Although sanctions are available, before resorting to court action it is better to make use of every positive approach. However, at the end of the day, in the interests of a child, if court action is deemed necessary, it should not be shied away from.

We need to promote good attendance at school in every possible way. Schools do that by offering incentives and prizes to pupils at the end of each term, school year and key stage. Although all those incentives are praiseworthy, it is necessary to analyse the reasons for poor attendance and to respond with strategies and targets that are aimed at reducing poor attendance.

Often, poor school attendance coincides with a negative attitude to school among a pupil's family group. If family authority figures express a negative attitude to education, poor school attendance may well be a feature of the school life of pupils who come from such households. It is important, too, that children's experience of school be positive and, in itself, does not become a barrier to attendance. If a pupil's school experience is rewarding and positive and takes place in an environment in which they feel valued and affirmed, the chances that their attendance will be good throughout their school life are greatly increased.

We cannot underestimate the effects of poor school attendance on vulnerable children. As well as the devastating effect that it has on a child's future and his or her life chances, non-attendance at school can help to ensure that negative attitudes to education are transmitted to another generation, thus prolonging the vicious circle of underachievement in what is often the most socially disadvantaged group in our society.

Unfortunately, the effects of poor attendance at school are not confined to educational underachievement. They may also be associated with early and ongoing involvement in crime. Families that take children out of school to go on holidays devalue the importance of school attendance. That practice should be discouraged actively by the Department and by all authorities in the educational world.

In conclusion, we have the tools at our disposal, in the form of computer modules available

through C2k, to collect the necessary data to help to address the problem. Generalised descriptors such as "authorised" or "unauthorised" may be too vague.

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

Mr D Bradley: Often, the former term may mask reasons for poor attendance that should cause alarm bells to ring. There is a need for more refined data to inform —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — the professionals involved to set targets for improvement at school, board and regional level —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — and to review them regularly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Dr Stephen Farry.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Dr Farry: That was a nice little overlap. I welcome the debate on an important subject that overlaps on so many aspects of social and economic policy in Northern Ireland. It is not simply an educational matter.

As a liberal, I believe that it is important that every individual be given the opportunity to develop their full potential; every person has intrinsic value and has a contribution to make. It is important that society bring everyone's talents to the fore, not just for those concerned but for society as a whole. We need a fully trained workforce, particularly in a very competitive global market. We need to ensure that we have a critical mass of people who can play a role. We also need to make sure that Northern Ireland plays its full role and takes every opportunity.

There is debate about post-primary education, the transfer procedure and whether selection should be used. Leaving that aside, however, we should acknowledge that, essentially, condemning some children as surplus to requirement or as failures will affect their motivation to continue in education. We should not deny that the current system has that side effect, which causes problems.

I want to focus on a couple of aspects that have not featured too much in the debate, although some Members touched on them.

Poor attendance is an indication of a higher propensity towards engagement in criminal activities or antisocial behaviour or, indeed, it could be a warning sign of family breakdown. That is not to say that every child who has a poor attendance record is from a broken home or is about to engage in crime, nor is it to say that children with very high attendance records are not involved in crime or antisocial behaviour or come from broken homes. However, there are patterns and indications of risk.

Not addressing the problems of broken homes and crime has a cost implication for society. There are cost pressures that other Departments have to pick up, whether it is the criminal justice system or health and social services in respect of interventions. Our response not just to this problem but to others is to focus on prevention, and, if that does not work, early intervention. We should focus on the importance of collaboration among Departments and agencies. The Department of Education has an important role in identifying the causes of poor attendance. However, education is only one player in what needs to be a co-ordinated response across agencies. The Department, schools and boards should draw attention to problems when they occur at the very early stages because poor attendance will be the trigger for someone to give attention to what is a looming and growing problem.

It is important that the Department and its different bodies encourage a culture of information sharing. We are trying to move towards collaboration, and I stress the importance of that. At times, however, education seems to be one of the laggards in its willingness to engage in information sharing and cross-collaboration with other Departments. It is important that this is one of those areas where that can be taken forward.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: A prime example is the nurture groups that I referred to earlier, which are an initiative supported by the Department for Social Development (DSD). The Department of Education said that it was a great idea and asked DSD to pilot the scheme. DSD paid the money, but now that the money is running done, the Department is not prepared to fund the initiative.

Dr Farry: I am grateful for the Chairperson's comments. We have the problem of a silo

mentality right across government in Northern Ireland, with Departments focusing on their core areas. There are opportunities for us all to save on the cost pressures and to produce more rounded results if Departments collaborate. It is important to battle through the bureaucracy or the culture of people giving priority to their direct statutory responsibilities and foregoing what, at times, seems to be the luxury of working with others, which, in some respects, should be seen as a core function of how Departments try to find that rounded solution.

On the back of this debate, I encourage the Minister to show even greater leadership in trying to urge her Department and the boards to work more closely with other Departments in passing on information about potential warning signs that could lead to wider problems elsewhere. In addition, the Department should look at the particular factors in schools that may contribute to individual students not having an adequate attendance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As this is the first occasion on which the Assembly will hear from Mr Paul Frew, I remind the House that it is convention that a maiden speech is made without interruption.

Mr Frew: At the outset of my maiden speech to the House, I pay tribute to my predecessor, Ian Paisley Jnr MP, who has moved on to the Mother of all Parliaments. On behalf of my party and the North Antrim constituency, I thank the former Member for his many years of hard work to date, and I look forward to working with him as my new MP.

Ian Paisley Jnr had a charisma that cannot be matched by any Member of this House. I jest when I say that he had an affliction. It is commonly known as a brass neck; a neck that served him and his constituents well. Ian never missed a trick in order to represent unionism in the House, and the House should see that as a loss, no matter who has replaced him. Ian also had a work record that will be hard to match, but I will surely endeavour to do so and to surpass it.

It is an enormous privilege to represent any constituency in this great House, with all its history and drama over the years, but to represent the constituency of North Antrim is, I am sure the House will agree, an extra privilege. I have lived in North Antrim all my short life. I live in the beautiful village of Broughshane outside the very busy shopping

town of Ballymena in the lovely rural setting of Country Antrim, and I will strive to represent all my constituents from Ballymena to Ballymoney, from Bushmills to Ballycastle, and every village and hamlet, street and road in between.

I am a hard worker, and I pay tribute to my parents for that work ethic. I also pay tribute to my wife and children for their support throughout my career. I have great pride in telling the House that I have come straight from the construction industry where I was a foreman electrician for many years. I have worked in the trade for 20 years, and I have seen at first hand the pain that has overcome the construction industry over the past number of years. I have suffered, as have the people whom I worked alongside. With the Lord's help, I am here to do a job of work for them and for all those in the private sector who have suffered so much over the past number of years. Members can be assured of that.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for that indulgence, and I turn now to the matter in hand. It is absolutely vital for the future of our children and our economy that all our children value and recognise the importance of education. The key to lifting people, families and communities out of deprivation is education. There can be no other way.

The Government can throw as much money as they like into area plans and funding opportunities, and they will do great work and make people's lives better. However, unless people go out and grab an education, things in those areas will stay very much the same and people's lives will be filled with shut doors and dead ends.

5.30 pm

Do not get me wrong: we have an excellent education system, or at least we should have and did have. Not everyone will avail themselves of that system and not everyone has the ability to get to the highest level, but they do not need to. Children need to know that they have pushed themselves as hard and as far as possible and, if they have done that, they will feel good about themselves and have confidence that will take them even further than the education that they have attained.

What are the factors that we should be looking at? First, parents have prime responsibility for their child's attendance at school. There seems

to be a larger problem among Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 pupils, but perhaps that can be understood. The Department and the education and library boards must better educate parents on the importance of their child's education. If children get into the habit of missing school for whatever minor reason, how will they cope when they enter the workplace? The Department should consider an effective programme to inform parents of their responsibilities, and impress on them that the days when their young could walk to the nearest building site or factory floor and expect to gain employment without exam certificates are long gone.

Another factor is confidence in the classroom. Not every child is academically minded, so a tailored system of schooling is necessary to offer an education that is appropriate for each young person. Each pupil has different abilities and skills, and for those who do not wish to pursue an academic path, more attractive vocational opportunities must be made available.

Truancy must be targeted more robustly, and parents and teachers must be assisted with that problem. More can be also done about bullying both inside and outside schools. I will end with a message that is coming from outside the House. How can the public expect the Department and the Minister to deal with the problem when they cannot deal with the Education and Skills Authority; the plight of the education and library boards; the transfer system; the review of special needs; the nought-to-six strategy; area-based planning; the school improvement policy; and the review of school funding?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. After that contribution, I almost feel the need to pay homage to Ian Paisley Jnr myself, but I will resist the temptation. Instead, I will take matters up with his North Antrim colleague. The motion before the House does not add any value to the debate on poor school attendance because it offers no proposals on a way forward, or any work plan or strategy on how we can collectively improve school attendance. It tells us what we already know:

"the high number of children whose attendance rate...is less than 85 %".

I have done some research, but I cannot figure out which "high number" the proposers

of the motion are referring to. I must look to the motion for that figure, and it seems to be roughly 40%. The motion appears to have been hastily put together, but the motivation behind it is good enough.

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure if I heard the Member correctly, but he seemed to be asking why those particular statistics were contained in the motion. My colleague Mr Beggs was seeking to highlight that there are wards in Belfast and elsewhere — some are in the Member's own constituency — in which, of the children with a less than 85% attendance rate, the rate stands at an incredible 40% to 45%. Therefore, almost half of the children in those wards are not attending school.

It is those specific wards that are the problem for the Ulster Unionist Party, and the proposers of the motion wanted to draw attention to them. I look forward to hearing the remainder of the Member's contribution but, for purposes of clarity, specific areas are affected and the Ulster Unionist Party feels that particular measures should be put in place in those areas.

Mr O'Dowd: I was questioning the validity of some of the percentages and what they refer to. However, the Member's explanation goes some way towards clarifying the matter for me, and, as I said, the motivation behind the motion seems to be well enough founded. We must question ourselves on the issue. We can sit here and get involved in the game of criticising the Minister but, as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education told the House at the beginning of his contribution, this matter has not even been discussed at that Committee. That Committee celebrated its third birthday in May, and I have been a member of it for the past two years.

If each issue that comes before the Assembly is seen as the most important issue, we will keep falling over ourselves because we have no strategy. The Department of Education can be criticised for having no strategy, but the Committee for Education has to have a strategy on education.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will in one second. Unless the Committee has a thought-out work programme on all the issues affecting education, we will continue to have high rates of poor attendance.

The Assembly is not tackling the issue collectively. I will now let the Chairperson in.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

Perhaps I have missed something to do with my role as the Chairperson and Mr O'Dowd's role as a member of the Committee. Is it not the Committee's role to scrutinise the Department's policies? The issue has not been brought to the Committee for Education because the Minister and the Department have not brought forward proposals for a policy to deal with it. That is why I gave an assurance that I will bring the issue to the Committee for Education and ask the Minister what she is doing.

Mr O'Dowd: Far be it for me to outline to a Chairperson of a Committee what a Committee's role is. The role of a Committee is to scrutinise and support the role of a Department, and a Committee has the right to conduct an inquiry into any subject that falls under its mandate. The Committee for Education has had its third birthday and is about to begin its first inquiry, so we cannot point fingers elsewhere. If the Committee for Education gets its act together around a programme of work, we can start to point fingers elsewhere.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No; I have given way twice. Let me get into some sort of rhythm.

At this stage of the debate, most things have already been said. I have a crucial question to pose that needs to be answered, and I do not have all the answers to it. Why, in certain wards and areas, is the non-attendance rate so high? Deprivation and poverty are factors. Not everyone lives in the perfect nuclear family, and, unfortunately, not everyone has perfect parents. In many cases, a child does not attend school because of reasons concerning that child, but there are many reasons for children not attending school, including the fact that some come from a terrible home life. Some of those children come from homes that have problems with alcohol and in which abuse takes place. That results in a child having no motivation or drive, so he or she does not want to go out to school.

A school should be a place of sanctuary and well-being for such a child, where he or she can go and leave behind the troubles of his or her domestic life. In many cases, that does not happen, not because the school is alien to

a child but because, at times, the pressures on teachers and on schools are so great that they do not identify that a child has a problem. Such a child is labelled a problem child, and, if child A, B or C is not in the classroom, that is sometimes seen as a good thing. Instead of identifying why a child —

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I am running out of time. Children are labelled in that way instead of reasons being identified for their not being in the classroom and ensuring that that child receives the support that he or she should get. I know that Members will mention nurture groups, which do an excellent job. If the funds were available, there would be a nurture group in every school in the North. However, we do not have the funds, and there will not be a nurture group in every school in the North. Therefore, we must examine other ways of ensuring that children who are absent —

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

Mr O'Dowd: — from the classroom are rescued at an early age so that they get the education to which the motion refers and that they educate themselves —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: — away from their terrible home life and out of poverty if that is the case.

Mr G Robinson: I shall concentrate on the impact that poor attendance has on individual pupils' chances for the rest of their lives and how that affects their whole family background. Perhaps an underlying medical problem or possible bullying explains poor attendance, so a child needs to let a parent or teacher know the circumstances. It is in the Minister's and the boards' remit to find ways to address those problems and to ensure that every child in Northern Ireland has the best possible chance in life through the education system. I do not want young people to be let down by the education system, because it is their path to success in life and to betterment for themselves and their families. Therefore, ways must be found to encourage young people to attend school. That is a matter that parents need to monitor and try to resolve as a matter of urgency in the interests of an individual child.

Poor attendance may also lead to a lack of skills in the Northern Ireland workforce. At a time when we are all looking forward to a better economic future, it is essential that young people maximise their skills to benefit Northern Ireland as a whole for the future.

Minister, it is essential that the problem of poor attendance is addressed to ensure that Northern Ireland and all our young people benefit in the future. I look forward to hearing your proposals to address that serious issue. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I congratulate Mr Frew on his maiden speech and on his elevation to the House. Broughshane is indeed a very beautiful village and is probably rivalled only by somewhere such as Rathfriland.

Mr Kennedy: Bessbrook.

Mr McCallister: We will go round the whole country now. I see that the Minister was about to jump up and shout "Omeath".

The issue for debate today is very important. Once Mr O'Dowd had finished his role of defending the Minister, he became very passionate about the issue, and I agree with much of what he said in the second part of his contribution. Some of the points that he touched on are some of the reasons that I and others were so disappointed with the nought-to-six strategy presentation to the Committee. I believe that truancy, family background and broken homes are linked and can have a major impact on children's life chances and whether they contribute in education, and in employment when they are older, and on whether they become economically active. All those issues are linked. Our education system is critical to upbringing. That is why the motion is here today.

I will be surprised if, given his contribution, Mr O'Dowd does not support this worthy motion. The motion is not as long as he would have liked because, if we had included references to the strategy, it would have taken forever to read out. That is the role of the Department.

Mr O'Dowd: I reassure the Member that I will support the motion, and I reassure him that I am after quality, not quantity.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: You are in the wrong party then.

Mr McCallister: I was not sure whether he said “quality” or “equality”. He is in the wrong party, or, perhaps, he should change places with the Minister.

Attendance at school is vital. My colleague Mr Beggs focused on the fact that attendance can make a difference in poor, more deprived wards. Other Members mentioned that in their contributions. The figures show a stark contrast. I pay tribute to Mr Beggs for researching the matter and for asking questions of the Department to find out that there is a huge difference in attendance at school and truancy between our more deprived wards and our more affluent wards. What will the Department do about that?

The Committee has an important role to scrutinise the Minister and her Department. I debate whether the role is to scrutinise and support. The Minister may like the Committee to support her blindly on every issue, but that is unlikely to happen. We must reach a stage at which a strategy is in place to tackle the problem. The Minister relies solely on figures on free school meals to highlight areas of deprivation. She has the statistics in her Department. In light of the pilot projects in some wards, will she bring forward a strategy to tackle truancy in our schools? Will she work on that to get the results that we need? The impact on those children's life chances is enormous. Quite frankly, we, as an Assembly, and she, as Minister, will fail thousands of children if we do not address that vital issue.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: The difficulty with the current Minister is that, although the Education Committee wrote to her to raise concerns and included a list of issues that the Committee felt were absent from the early years strategy and the nought-to-six strategy, she still went ahead on Friday and published it. Therefore, what is the relevance of the Minister coming to the House and asking for support when she is looking for money but not being prepared to take advice when she is given it?

5.45 pm

Mr McCallister: I will be even more shocked than the Member when the Minister takes advice from anyone. The nought-to-six strategy was a prime example of that. There were huge concerns from virtually everyone in the Committee room that it was a case of: “so

much for five years' work”. I was disappointed, because I thought that it should have been the Department's flagship policy to look at all the areas.

As my party leader has said on numerous occasions, the problem is not so much at 11-plus but at 11-minus. We are failing children. The purpose of the strategy and the purpose of today's debate is to see what we can do and what the Minister is doing, and will do, to address the issue. That is what we want to hear in her contribution. We do not want to hear the usual warm flannel about the ESA. According to the Minister, if only we had the ESA, the world would be a better place. I urge Members to support the motion.

Mrs M Bradley: School days are supposed to be the happiest days of your life. That is true for some people, but for others it can be 12 years of hell on earth. However, the participation of education welfare officers, working in tandem with schools and parents, should be a positive step in the right direction towards making absenteeism unacceptable.

Numerous debates in this place have centred on underachievement and on providing young people with the educational tools to enhance their chances of achieving their goals in life and enhance the image of a working life rather than one in which the highlight of the week is the receipt of their dole money. It is sometimes difficult for children who come from a family background in which there have been problems or ongoing difficulties to focus on school and its benefits. Sadly, it is also difficult to explain to children that there are benefits in attending school and earning qualifications, when the reality is that they can get involved in illegal practices, such as drug dealing, which result in perks, such as luxury cars, designer clothing, etc. Therefore, we need input from education welfare officers, parents and schools, and communities in order to encourage a change in attitude and approach to school and its importance.

In many instances, the education of parents will have the biggest influence on the child and on the formation of the child's opinions and attitudes towards education. At this point, I am reminded of the need for a comprehensive early years strategy, which is substantive in content and practical in approach, so that it can play its role in affirming a positive approach to

education, and, ultimately, encouraging positive trends in attendance and enhancing the school life of pupils.

The Sure Start programme helps parents and children alike, and an extension to that would help parents and children to avail of that support. However, to deal with the matter in hand, there are issues within issues here, and there are worrying statistics with regard to absenteeism. Those require urgent, positive treatment and attention. I would like to think that when we leave the House today with a firm commitment from the Minister, we will have some insight into her plans to tackle this worrying issue that, unfortunately, has become a trend. I hope that she will reconsider supporting nurture education in schools, because it helps children who need that extra support to enjoy their school years. It also encourages them to attend school.

We also need to consider things that would not have happened some years ago, such as children not being able to go to school because they are caring for their parents. Some children from primary school age up are running their homes because of the problems of their parents. That is a sad situation for those children, and we need to find some way of addressing such issues.

Mr Bell: If the Assembly gets this right and can reduce poor attendance at school, it will have gone a significant way towards reducing the section of the population that will be economically inactive, or become involved with the Prison Service or the Probation Board. All relevant research shows lack of education to be the major factor in people's poor life outcomes and opportunities. It is vital that there be early intervention.

I pay tribute to the Member from Londonderry, who was exactly right when she said that many children of all ages care for people who have physical or psychological illnesses, or who are dealing with the after-effects of alcohol abuse and, more latterly, drug abuse. In that sense, the sins of the fathers are being passed on to second and third generations.

I congratulate Mr Frew on his maiden speech. I must tell him that, until I spoke at a Twelfth demonstration in Broughshane, I thought that the greatest site was in Belfast. He managed to take me through the Braid district to Broughshane. It was absolutely spectacular; it

was like walking through the Garden of Eden — before the Fall, I should add. [Laughter.] I only hope that Hansard has not picked that up.

I turn to the critical issue that must be addressed: parenting. Many agencies, such as Sure Start, put together early interventions that seek to assist parents to overcome neglect by omission or actual neglect. A range of agencies deals with young people who have gone through the trauma of emotional, physical and, indeed, sexual abuse.

That can drive children in either of two ways. In my professional experience, it can drive children to underperform and towards poor attendance at school. Equally, however, it can drive them to over-perform. That is why teachers' professional expertise is needed. In that sense, Northern Ireland's education system has very many highly qualified teachers who take their pastoral commitments seriously and, in many ways, compensate for difficulties at home by providing what one Member referred to as a "sanctuary" atmosphere.

A child's problems must be addressed at the earliest onset, when he or she starts to fail. In that light, I want to take time to pay tribute to the work of the Prince's Trust's Team programme and other agencies that seek to provide a dedicated mentoring service to those children at a critical juncture in their lives — at a time when they fail not only to attend school but in the outcomes that they could reasonably be expected to achieve. In many cases, those bodies can provide a dedicated mentoring service with the help of people who have been in such situations, have walked that way previously, and know where it leads.

I do not congratulate the Department of Education often. However, that project is part funded by that Department. It is a worthy programme that can change the lives of young people at the onset of difficulties. Research from the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) and many other bodies shows that if young people are given educational focus, proper commitment and genuine lifetime opportunities, most of the problems that are associated with chemical dependency, depression and, ultimately, more serious mental health issues can be prevented because those young people have a reason to get up in the morning, and something to do and achieve.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education:

Does the Member believe that, given recent soundings from the Department that there has been consideration of raising the age for commencement of formal education to six, the benefits of early identification and intervention could be jeopardised if they took place at a later stage in a child's education?

Mr Bell: I do not believe in raising the age for commencing formal education. I have a degree in psychology, although I have never read educational psychology. I believe that Northern Ireland's education system outperforms that of the rest of the UK. It is not perfect; we have to change it in many respects. However, we should seek to retain and enhance what is good about it.

I congratulate Mr O'Dowd on defending the Minister as if he was defending his inheritance. However, I think that we can both agree that some aspects of the issue go beyond the House.

I pay sincere tribute to our education welfare service, which, alongside the Youth Justice Agency and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, has been active in seeking to get young people back into school. I pay tribute to the teachers who have attended the case conferences for many of the children who have fallen through the net. Among other things, they have managed to get those children off child protection registers, through a proper child protection plan.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Bell: I commend the motion to the House and congratulate Mr Beggs on his diligence in bringing it to us.

The Minister of Education (Ms Ruane):

Go raibh maith agat. Go raibh maith agat as an deis seo a thabhairt dom béim a leagan ar thábhacht an fhreastail ar scoil. Muna mbíonn páistí agus daoine óga ar scoil, ní bhfaighidh siad an tairbhe a bhaineann leis na deiseanna foghlama a bhíonn le fáil sna scoileanna.

I thank Mr Beggs and the other Members who tabled the motion for doing so, because it gives us an opportunity to emphasise the importance of attendance at school. It is an issue that my Department has taken very seriously, even if the Education Committee may not have discussed it.

If children and young people are not in school, they will not benefit from the opportunities to

learn that are provided there. Members have mentioned taking advice. I always take good advice, so I look forward to their advice. I look forward to the Committee playing its role by assisting and advising as well as by scrutinising.

Tackling underachievement is at the heart of my vision for education, and we have rightly made it a priority at the North/South Ministerial Council. At every single meeting of the Council, we have heard presentations on underachievement, and lack of attendance is part of that, whether it involves our ethnic minority children; our Traveller children; boys who, in some cases, are switched off by the curriculum; or girls who face particular barriers.

We know that schools and their communities are working in a determined effort to improve the life chances of young people. For example, one programme in the South that was mentioned at a recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting and at an earlier Council meeting on Traveller education is the home/school/community liaison initiative, which focuses on the links between home, community and school. That initiative aims to ensure that when there is a problem, there is somebody who can identify how to bring those three areas together.

In the North, the full service community network establishes strong links between schools, their local community, statutory agencies, the business community, the voluntary and community sector and, crucially, parents. At the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in Warrenpoint last week, we had presentations from the principals of the Belfast Boys' Model School and Belfast Model School for Girls and from the full service community network in west Belfast. All those contributors talked about working on attendance. The Boys' Model School and the Belfast Model School for Girls have significantly increased their attendance rates and achievements and have had percentage rises in the number of pupils getting five good GCSEs. Therefore, there has been an enormous focus on that issue.

The task force on Traveller education will produce a set of recommendations that focus on improving attendance and attainment, some of which will be transferable across all disadvantaged groups and may lead the way in improving overall attendance.

We can aim low and pretend to ourselves that we have a system that is as good as, or better

than, the system in England, Scotland or Wales. However, I always aim high. I am not looking for average, and I compare our system with the best; the system in Finland is achieving for all its young people. England, Scotland and Wales are not achieving in the way that they should, nor is the rest of Ireland. This island is not achieving in the way that it should. So let us not settle for some midway point in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) statistics. Let us aim right for the top and get the best.

If we think that we have a world-class education system, we will have to think again, folks, because we do not.

6.00 pm

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. There have been improvements. When I came in here in 2007, 12,000 young people, or 47%, were leaving school without five good GCSEs, including English or Irish and maths. That figure has gone down to 9,000-plus, which is something like 43%. I welcome that. We can celebrate those achievements, because that is significant for those extra young people who can get on to at least the first rung of the ladder. It is not good enough, however, because too many young people are not getting on to the first rung of the ladder.

Schools have to play a very important role now. They must provide a support system for those who are most vulnerable, and they must encourage a culture of regular attendance by everyone. When that is not happening, we need to ask why. We need to look at what we can do to support the schools. I think that it was Dominic Bradley who said that we need positive interventions and that we need to understand why some children are not attending school. I support him in that. Of course we need to look at sanctions, but positive interventions are key.

The collection of data and detailed information is a critical part of that process. In the October 2008 school census, my Department collected for the first time detailed attendance data for all grant-aided schools. That related to the 2007-08 school year and was published in April 2009. Information relating to the 2008-09 school year was published in March 2010. Data for the 2009-2010 school year will be published in spring 2011. That is something significant that has been done since I have come into office

here. We will have detailed information for three years, and it will facilitate more in-depth analysis and inform how current approaches to tackling poor attendance might be effectively tailored.

We know that, during 2007-08, at district council level, the highest rate of primary schools with less than 85% attendance was to be found in Belfast, and the lowest was to be found in Banbridge. The ward with the highest rate of primary school pupils with less than 85% attendance was Coalisland South, with 209.8. That equates to 21%, or two tenths. Therefore, there are no wards with up to four tenths of primary school pupils with less than 85% attendance. Perhaps that is what my colleague John O'Dowd was alluding to.

In post-primary school, which covers years 8 to 12, the district council with the highest rate of pupils with less than 85% attendance was in Belfast, and the lowest was in Armagh. Two wards, Shaftesbury and the Mount, had more than four tenths of post-primary pupils with attendance rates of less than 85%. Absence rates for 15 to 17-year-olds show that five wards were above the four-tenths threshold.

The data are based on the ward in which the pupil lives, and, as pupils often attend schools outside that ward, we may need to engage proactively with local communities. We must engage with local communities. The 125 pupils with less than 85% attendance who lived in Shaftesbury were enrolled in 20 different schools in various wards. That is a problem. The Members on the opposite Benches can pretend and delude themselves that the selective system does not make a difference. The energy that goes into that pretence bemuses me at times.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No. We should be building good, local community schools, not breaking up primary schools and sending children to 20 different schools in an area.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Education: What have you done?

The Minister of Education: The Member asked what my Department has done. Every single thing that we have done and every single policy that we have brought in has focused on underachievement, attendance rates and the difficulties that our young people are facing.

Those difficulties may be emotional or related to sexual violence or abuse in the home. Whatever the situation, we are working with Women's Aid and Amnesty International.

We have brought forward transfer 2010. Children transfer from home to preschool, preschool to primary school, primary school to post-primary school and post-primary school to the world of work or further and higher education. Anyone who thinks that transitions are not important does not understand children. If you tell a child that he or she is a failure at 10 or 11, it is not coincidental that gaps start opening up.

We have introduced a good, revised curriculum that stimulates our young people. Fortunately, certain children are no longer at the back of the class not being taught while others are. Jonathan Bell made a very important point with which I totally agree: some of our children suffer mental health problems by trying to over-perform. Psychologists and psychiatrists across the board will say that that is happening to some of our young people. That is something that we need to look at.

Recently, I visited Beechcroft, the new adolescent centre. It is not just underachieving young people who are in centres such as Beechcroft: there are also overachievers in those centres.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister give way?

The Minister of Education: No; Members had their opportunity to speak.

That is something that we need to look at. What have we done? We have brought forward transfer 2010; we have changed our curriculum; we are working on a literacy and numeracy strategy; and we are working on a Traveller education task force, because that is where some of the worst attendance rates are. Why? Our Traveller children face such problems because the school system has turned them off education. We have put counsellors in every post-primary school for a certain period in the week; we have an anti-bullying strategy across Ireland, north and south, and in England, Scotland and Wales. We are learning from one another.

Last Friday, I launched consultation on the draft early years strategy. *[Interruption.]* I am damned if I do and damned if I don't. We launched it in Cullyhanna, in south Armagh,

where the preschool, primary and foundation stages all work together. I pay tribute to St Patrick's Primary School in Cullyhanna, which is one of the many schools that got an outstanding inspection report. Schools from all constituencies came to Newry last week to celebrate their achievements and their inspection reports. More and more providers from the preschool sector are coming to the fore with very good inspection reports.

Thirty per cent of learning is done in schools, but 70% is done in the community and by parents. The point was made that parental involvement is absolutely crucial. Where generations of parents have suffered and been adversely affected by our poor education system, there are cycles of disadvantage and young people get the wrong messages. We need to break those cycles of disadvantage once and for all. That is what we will do, and my Department is doing everything that it can in that regard.

The Chairperson of the Education Committee may be interested to know that the Education Welfare Service supports schools through proactive work and encourages them to refer pupils when there are concerns about attendance and when the threshold of less than 85% attendance has been reached. It will be useful to the Education Committee to know that the Education Welfare Service offers interventions such as the primary attendance matters programme and the big move programme, which prepares year 7 pupils for the transition to post-primary school.

The Education Welfare Service also provides targeted support for vulnerable groups such as the school-aged mothers project, which supports young women of school age who are pregnant or parenting to continue in education if they wish. Members will be aware that a young girl's outcomes can be significantly affected if she is not given proper support. Members should also note that we have some of the highest levels of teenage pregnancy in Europe. I have said it before in the House and I will say it again: girls do not get pregnant on their own. Our boys and girls need to take responsibility, as does our entire society. We need to put preventative programmes in place across the system on sexual matters so that the best possible age-appropriate information is available at the earliest possible opportunity to all our young people.

I am very aware that children and young people experience stress in their lives, as has been mentioned. There are very high levels of violence against women and children at all different levels — physical, emotional and sexual. That can impact negatively on their capacity to learn and their desire to participate in school. That is why we are now focusing on barriers to learning and developing a pupil's emotional health and well-being programme in partnership with the education sector, the health sector and the voluntary sector. In conclusion, I reassure Members that we take the problem of poor attendance very seriously and we look at all the underlying reasons. I thank our officials, who have worked very hard in that area. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr B McCrea: I feel a little bit like Flash Gordon; I have 10 minutes to save the world. Listening to the Minister go on, I sometimes wonder why she does not get on more with people, because we can agree with quite a lot of what she says. She mentioned a few things. Women's Aid — I recently hosted a reception for representatives from Women's Aid from right across the Province. We talked about that. She mentioned things about children from the Travelling community and the impact of domestic violence; I also launched a report from the Policing Board in the Long Gallery with her colleagues. She talked about some other things to do with sexual health; there is an all-party group on sexual health in which we discuss all of those issues. There is actually quite a lot of information coming from around these Benches, and people can come along and put a point of view. Of course, we are not going to agree on absolutely everything, but we are prepared to have a reasoned debate.

One of the things the Minister said is that she does not understand the energy that we waste talking about transfer and academic selection. Actually, we could turn that around and wonder why she is wasting so much energy on that issue. It is not the cause. There is no cause and effect that she is trying to address. We all do care about educational underachievement. We have talked repeatedly about the nought-to-six strategy because we are all convinced that early intervention is the key. I have to say to the Minister that I am really sorry, but her nought-to-six strategy was not very good. It hurts me to say that, but professionals in that area say that, after seven years, they were expecting more.

The Chairperson of the Committee for

Education: It is not only the nought-to-six strategy, but special educational needs and inclusion. I challenge the Minister to name one organisation that said, when that document was published, that it was the first time the Department had ever listened to an issue that had been raised with it. They do not get it.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for the intervention. I am trying to lift some of the very positive things that the Minister has said. I am speaking directly through you, Mr Speaker, to the Minister about the issues where data is important. The Minister outlined certain amounts of data, which apparently was not available to her colleague Mr O'Dowd. He asked me certain questions, and I went off to get the data. I apologise to those Members whose speeches I missed because I had to go and get it, but here is what the data tells us. This is what the motion is about.

The Minister rightly mentioned the Shaftesbury area in Belfast, with the figure of 428 per 1,000 pupils with low attendance, and the Mount, at 428 per 1,000. However, she neglected to mention the Malone area, at 15.6 — that is 1.5%. The Minister quite often lectures us about what happens in the Shankill or Malone areas. The data are here. Finaghy has a figure of 41.4 — that is 4% — yet in the Falls area the figure is 21%. The issue is that we have data here. I also looked at Mr O'Dowd's constituency, because he raised the issue. In Ballybay in Craigavon, 33% of post-primary schoolchildren have an attendance record of 85% or less. That is a shocking statistic, is it not? That is what we want to draw to the attention of the Minister. The Minister said that she has observed those statistics, but we want to know what actions will come out of that.

6.15 pm

There is poor attendance not only in the post-primary sector but in the primary sector. Although figures for the latter are somewhat lower, which the Minister pointed out, that is still a shocking fact. Does the Minister find it surprising that 15% of children on the Falls Road, 14% of children in the neighbouring ward of Duncairn and 16% of children in the Mount ward are not going to primary school on a regular basis? If children do not go to school, there is little that we can do to help them. The Minister mentioned that school accounts

for 30% of the educational achievement of a child and that his or her environment accounts for the remaining 70%. However, those percentages may change depending on the child's family background. I argue that school plays an increasing and important role in the lives of children from the most disadvantaged areas. Mr Storey made a point about the nurture programme. Children from the most disadvantaged areas need the most help. We are looking for targeted and effective interventions at an early age to ensure that we get the positive outcomes for those children.

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The Member spoke about the importance of early intervention in the early years. Earlier today, I raised an issue about the I CAN facility for children with speech and language needs. Does the Member agree that certain children do not want to go to school because their special educational needs are not being identified and met? The Minister could take action on that issue, but she refuses to do so. I am sure that the Member agrees that that issue requires early intervention and that if such an intervention were made children would be keener to attend school.

Mr B McCrea: I thank the Member for his intervention. I also raised that matter today during questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, because we appear to have squandered £60 million, and yet, the I CAN centre needs only £60,000 to stay open.

Although we are entering genuinely difficult financial trials, there is much that we agree on and many things that we can do if we make a concerted effort. I have heard Mrs Bradley and Mr Bradley talk about such measures in the past. There are areas on which we agree and on which we would like to focus, and poor attendance at schools is one area where we can and should make a difference. My colleague Mr Beggs, who led the debate because he was responsible for gathering the figures, has said repeatedly that — and I think that the Minister will agree with this — one of the two most important issues that we can deal with in addressing educational achievement is poor attendance at school.

The Minister said that she now has tracking data. Therefore, perhaps it would be appropriate to see what happened in 2007-08 and what has been the result of the interventions that

she mentioned. In response to an intervention from Mr Storey, she said that her Department has been working on the issue. If that were the case, we would expect to see a marked reduction in the figures. Forty per cent is not a small percentage. Four tenths sounds small but when it is expressed as a percentage — 40% — it does not. We could actually go the other way and say that almost half of the children in those wards are not going to school on a regular basis. Children who fall behind cannot catch up easily. I understand that there are ideological issues about whether a selective system is right or wrong, and we can debate that at another time and place. The real issue is about the need to start dealing with educational underachievement early on.

Mr O'Dowd: In the remaining 60 seconds that he has, will the Member give us some suggestions as to how to deal with that?

Mr B McCrea: I will. First of all, I would welcome proposals from the Minister. However, we need targeted intervention and additional and concentrated resources in those wards in areas of under-education that need it most. We must concentrate on programmes, as highlighted by Mr Storey, that are genuinely effective, the nurturing programme being but one of those.

Mrs M Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I am sorry, Mary, I have only 20 seconds left, otherwise I would.

Minister, please take on board, through what I am saying to you now, that we really must do something for our children. For every year that goes by, we are consigning another generation to the dustbin. I am not saying that that is your fault. It is our fault. Collectively, we have to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Mr McCrea.

Mr B McCrea: You must realise, Minister, that if you work with your colleagues in this place, you will get a better result than if you try to go it alone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr B McCrea: I ask the House to unite behind the issue that my honourable colleague Mr Beggs brought to its attention.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The school bell has rung.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the high number of children whose attendance rate at school is less than 85 and that, in some areas, up to four tenths of children have an attendance rate below 85 ; further notes that absence from school will reduce the likelihood of children reaching their full educational potential, will limit their future job opportunities and could contribute to cycles of deprivation; and calls on the Minister of Education to detail the specific action she has taken or plans to take to address this pressing issue.

Adjourned at 6.21 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Employment and Learning

Enterprise Ulster: Annual Report and Accounts 2006-07 and Accounts April to June 2007

*Published on
Monday 28 June 2010*

The Minister for Employment and Learning

(Sir Reg Empey): I am pleased to inform Assembly Members that the Enterprise Ulster Annual Report & Accounts for the 2006/07 year and also the Accounts for the three month period prior to the closure of Enterprise Ulster on 30 June 2007 will be laid today. As a result of the winding up of the organisation there were a number of financial and auditing issues which took some time to resolve. The accounts were signed off by the NIAO earlier this year and I am now in a position to proceed with laying the documents.

The Report and Accounts are available on the internet at www.delni.gov.uk, and hard copies are available from the Library. Additional copies may be obtained by contacting the Department's Employment Service Modernisation Branch on 028 9025 2238.

