

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 2 March 2015
Volume 102, No 5

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 2 March 2015

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

Civil Service Departments: Reduction/Names/Functions

Mr Speaker: The First Minister wishes to make a statement.

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): Mr Speaker, I want to make a statement to the Assembly on recent decisions reached by the Executive on the names and functions of future Departments.

There is a commitment in the Programme for Government to agree changes to the structures of government that will operate in the next Assembly mandate. One of the areas covered by last year's political talks was institutional reform. The Stormont House Agreement of 23 December 2014 included a commitment that the number of Departments should be reduced from 12 to nine in time for the 2016 Assembly election, with the new allocation of departmental functions to be agreed by the parties. Given the pressing timescale, it was important that early decisions were made on the names and functions of the future Departments. The matter was discussed in January by the party leaders, convened in an implementation group set up to follow through on the Stormont House Agreement commitments. Furthermore, the Executive discussed departmental reorganisation extensively at no fewer than four meetings during January and February. Those discussions concluded at last Thursday's Executive meeting. I am now able to announce the decisions that have been reached on the departmental structures coming into operation next year.

The following will be the nine future Departments.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will bring together most of the existing functions of DARD with the inland fisheries functions of DCAL and most of DOE's

environmental functions, including regulation. It will also take on OFMDFM's current policy responsibility for sustainability strategy.

The Department for Communities will combine the existing functions of DSD with most DCAL functions, with the exceptions being inland fisheries and waterways. It will also take over DEL's employment service and DOE's responsibilities for local government and built heritage. In addition, the future Department will assume a range of OFMDFM delivery and operational functions on the social investment fund, racial equality, united communities and good relations, disability and poverty, gender and sexual orientation, and north-west sites and strategy.

The Department for the Economy will combine the functions of DETI and DEL, except for the employment service.

The Department of Education will continue the existing functions of DE, together with a range of children's services, including OFMDFM's policy responsibilities for the childcare strategy and for children and young people. The definition of children's services transferring to this new Department will need further refinement, though it is agreed that child protection will remain with the Department of Health.

The Department of Finance will continue with the existing functions of DFP, but also take over from OFMDFM the government advertising unit and the NI Direct central editorial team.

The Department of Health will continue the existing functions of DHSSPS, except for public safety. It will also take on OFMDFM's policy responsibilities for older people and the active ageing strategy.

The Department for Infrastructure will exercise the existing responsibilities of DRD, but will also take on a range of functions from other existing Departments: vehicle regulation, road safety and Driver and Vehicle Agency functions from DOE; the Rivers Agency from DARD; inland

waterways from DCAL; and, from OFMDFM, the strategic investment unit and several regeneration sites, including the Crumlin Road Gaol.

The Department of Justice will continue the existing functions of DOJ, but will also take responsibility for public safety from DHSSPS, and the support function for the Planning Appeals Commission/Water Appeals Commission from OFMDFM.

Finally, our Department, OFMDFM, will be significantly transformed. Its new name will be the Executive Office. As is clear from the previous description of the functions of the other Executive Departments, OFMDFM will be transferring most of its delivery functions. It will retain its role in supporting the Executive and the central institutions, including coordination of the Programme for Government, international relations, civil contingencies and the executive information service. Policy responsibility and coordination will remain in relation to equality, good relations, the Together: Building a United Community strategy and Delivering Social Change. Sponsorship and support for a number of key institutions will also be retained, notably the Attorney General's Office, the Equality Commission, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission, the historical institutional abuse inquiry, the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, the Victims and Survivors Service and the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

That, then, is the general shape of the future departmental system as agreed by the Executive. It will be subject to further refinement of details as work proceeds on the legislative implementation of these decisions.

These are machinery of government changes. No functions are being done away with and no policies terminated. Staff will follow functions, and there may be a certain amount of early disruption. However, once the changes have been effected, there will undoubtedly be greater efficiency. There will be fewer Ministers and departmental hierarchies. Permanent secretaries, central management units, press offices and support functions can all be rationalised.

This will be administratively challenging, but a broadly based programme board has been established to set direction and oversee implementation. The Executive have also agreed the drafting of a Departments Bill and a Transfer of Functions Order to provide a legislative basis for these changes. We aim to

introduce the Departments Bill to the Assembly after the Easter recess. A more detailed Transfer of Functions Order will be available for Assembly scrutiny later this year. There will be extensive opportunity for the Assembly to consider and debate these changes.

This will be the most extensive reorganisation of the departmental system since 1999. It provides an opportunity for a leaner, more joined-up Administration, with improved cohesion between, and within, Departments. This should mean ultimately greater efficiency in our Administration and improved services to our citizens.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I welcome the First Minister's statement and the commitment to deliver on this important Stormont House Agreement commitment. The Minister talks about a significant transformation in his own Department. He will be aware that OFMDFM is sometimes ridiculed for having more staff than 10 Downing Street or the west wing of the White House. I wonder what the implications are for staffing, as OFMDFM becomes the Executive Office and sheds its delivery functions.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful for the question, not least because it allows me to ridicule those who make the comparison between the White House and a delivery Department, which is what OFMDFM was, with hundreds of staff acting as a full Department rather than just as an Executive office. It will be massively transformed; the staff complement will be significantly reduced. Only at a later stage will we be able to indicate precisely what that division will be, but, after this change, it will be one of the most effective and efficient organisations that one could possibly imagine.

Mr Moutray: I thank the First Minister for his statement. Can the First Minister indicate what the rationale is for a single name for most Departments?

Mr P Robinson: I think that my friend will be aware that literally hundreds of functions are carried out by Departments. We went through this at the Executive meeting, and each of the Departments would have maybe 10 major functions outlined if one were to give standing to each of those elements. We tried where possible — for most of the Departments, it was possible — to get some generic title that would cover the range of functions that they will hold. The one Department for which it was not quite

possible to do that was the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs because it is very hard to get a generic term that will cover each of those sometimes diverse functions. It is to make it less confusing. It will take some time, I suppose, for everybody to get used to which Department carries out various functions, but, as no functions have been terminated, no policies have been brought to an end and all the functions of government will still go on, I think that the easier that the title is for people to remember, the better.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the First Minister for his statement. Minister, do you feel that the reduction in Departments will help to reduce the silo mentality that exists in the Departments?

Mr P Robinson: Yes, I think that the silo mentality is worsened because of the system of government that we have. The Departments almost take on a party flavour. You talk about Sinn Féin Departments or DUP Departments or SDLP, Alliance or Ulster Unionist Departments, and people should be focused on what is actually being delivered by those Departments. Whatever we do here, the purpose of it is not simply some moving around of the responsibilities that each of the parties will have; this is about getting a proper, efficient, functioning Executive. I think that the longer that the Executive work together the more that we will be able to get that collectivity that is necessary in the Executive and the more that people will look at the overall picture. Indeed, from St Andrews, it has been necessary, I think, for Ministers in a Department to win support from their colleagues for any novel, contentious or cross-cutting issue. I think that that adds to the collective responsibility that we each have one to the other.

Mr Attwood: I thank the First Minister for his statement. Which new Department and which new Minister will in future be responsible for strategic planning and taking article 31 decisions? Given that you have said that the numbers of staff in OFMDFM will be significantly reduced, can you indicate, in round terms, whether that will be 40%, 50% or 60%? Will that extend to the number of special advisers — SpAds — that OFMDFM enjoys?

Mr P Robinson: I think that the remaining planning functions go to the Department for Infrastructure. I cannot tell you who the Minister will be because these will take effect after the next Assembly election.

Mr Hamilton: It could be you.

Mr P Robinson: It may well be that we will have 100% of the seats, and, therefore, I could perhaps give you a name. Whoever the Minister is, I think that you will have a much more coherent Department with all the infrastructure issues being dealt with together.

This will reduce the number of Ministers. It may have an impact on the number of junior Ministers. Some larger Departments might argue that they have a better case for a junior Minister than the Executive Office. The SpAds will follow the Ministers wherever they go, but there will be fewer special advisers because of the reduced number of Departments. That should bring joy to some people in the House at least.

12.15 pm

Mr Lyttle: I welcome progress on the important Stormont House commitment to improve the effectiveness of the Northern Ireland Executive. Will the First Minister provide an update on the Stormont House commitment to deliver an independent audit of the cost of division to all Departments to ensure service delivery that promotes sharing over separation in Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: As we are dealing with a specific issue about Departments and functions, that does not exactly sit alongside it. However, an implementation group has been set up as a result of the Stormont House Agreement, and the leaders of each party and some of their colleagues are on it. If the Member feels that progress is not fast enough, I am sure that he will get the ear of his party leader and tell him that he is not moving fast enough.

Mrs Hale: I thank the First Minister for his statement to the House this afternoon. You reiterated that no functions are being done away with and no policies are being terminated, so do you expect financial savings when the changes take place?

Mr P Robinson: Unquestionably, there will be savings, which might come to the Assembly as well as to the Executive. When you cut out three private offices, three permanent secretaries and their staff and all the paraphernalia of government that goes with them, there are savings to be made. If you have nine rather than 12 Committees covering Departments, I am sure that the Assembly will also offer money back to my colleague the Minister of Finance on the savings that will be made here.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the First Minister for his statement. With the proposed disappearance of DCAL, there is an obvious point to be made about the role of arts and sport in our community. That will be absorbed in the Department for Communities, but would it not have been more appropriate to have included, together with communities, a reference to the arts and sport, given their central importance?

Mr P Robinson: I mentioned to my colleague that there are hundreds of functions of government, and I am sure that all Assembly Members will have their own view of what the real priorities are. However, if one were to look at the Department for Communities and add "arts" to the title, is the Member saying that that is more important than housing; urban regeneration; the Social Security Agency; child maintenance services; the voluntary and community sector; museums; libraries; creativity and architecture; language; cultural diversity; sport; the Public Record Office; employment services; local government; the social investment fund; and racial equality? I could go on and on. If the argument is that arts is more important than all those issues, the Member can ask the question, but I do not believe that it is more important than many of those issues. That is why a generic title serves the Department much better.

Mr Spratt: I thank the First Minister for his statement to the House this afternoon. If changes are being made to the number of Departments for 2016, why are we waiting until 2021 to change the number of MLAs?

Mr P Robinson: After over a decade of my party arguing for a reduction in the number of Departments, I do not want my joy to be dampened in any way now that that is crystallising in the Assembly. We also want a reduction in the number of Assembly Members.

During the talks process, my party argued that it should be down to somewhere in the region of 70. We were prepared to compromise in the region of 90. At the end of the day, the Stormont House Agreement said that it would be reduced to 90 by 2021, but it could be done for 2016 and would still be within the terms set out in the agreement. I hope that, in the implementation group the party leaders are in, we can convince people that a faster timetable is possible. There is no legislative reason why it could not be done, there would be significant savings and it would make the Assembly more in line, though not entirely in line, with the representation in Scotland and Wales. The

Assembly is still two or three times as large, per head of the population, as Scotland and Wales. I think everybody recognises that it needs to be done, and I hope we have sufficient stability here for people to think that this is the right time to do it.

Mr Kinahan: I find this fascinating. It will be great to see the Department of the Economy coming on board, which I think was Lord Empey's idea many years ago.

Will the Executive move on from being a two-party system or, using the implementation groups, will it move to involving all parties in the consensus that we are working towards, particularly in how we link with the Government at Westminster to deal with the reserved matters that affect us? We do not seem to have any suitable links for pulling things together.

Mr P Robinson: Far be it from me to remind the Member that it was his party that created the system. We have been able to refine and improve it as time has gone on, but it should not be a two-party system. We have a full-time implementation body: it is called the Executive. All the Executive parties are there, and all take part in the discussions that we have and the decisions that are made. I hope that, as time goes on, the smaller parties — I have to point out that not all of the three smaller parties are in the same category on this — recognise that they have a responsibility to their colleagues in the Executive to take the position that is collectively agreed, rather than trying to score party political points outside and look for issues where they can try to undermine the two main parties. The onus is not on the two main parties but on those who choose to separate themselves from an Executive decision.

Mr G Robinson: My question could be partially answered, but could I ask the First Minister whether any consideration has been given to the role of junior Ministers?

Mr P Robinson: Junior Ministers were thought to be necessary in OFMDFM because, unknown to a number of people — at least if they know, they have not let on — OFMDFM takes in the broad range of work of all of the government Departments and therefore, both in terms of special advisers and the need for junior Ministers, it is recognised that there is a considerable workload across the range of government responsibilities. We will maintain all the strategic roles, issues and functions of OFMDFM, but we will have a much more strategic role, rather than a delivery role. That will allow greater coordination between

Departments in the future. I indicated in my statement that this was the broad outline of what we wanted to do.

It was necessary for us to have agreement on what the Departments would be and what they would be called because we have to start preparing the legislation. We can refine the functions further. There is still room for us to discuss some of those issues. We still have not decided whether junior Ministers are needed in the new Executive Office, whether they should go to other Departments and whether there is a view that, because more business will be carried out by other Departments, they have a greater call for a junior Minister. Those issues have not been decided. The responsibility for that lies with the deputy First Minister and me. We have the sole responsibility under the legislation for determining whether there are junior Ministers and where they should be. The deputy First Minister and I will discuss that in the future.

Ms Lo: I welcome the Minister's statement, particularly the inclusion of "Environment" in the new Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. However, given the recent examples of us facing imminent risk of infraction fines over horse mussels in Strangford lough due to the opposing objectives of DARD and DOE, what safeguards will be put in place to ensure that the interests of the agriculture and fishing industries will not trump the protection of the environment?

Mr P Robinson: The safeguard is in the hands of the Minister, the Committee and those who have the responsibility. I would have thought that having the two of them in the one Department allows for greater coordination and hopefully a greater understanding of the pros and cons of each issue. Ultimately, the responsibility lies, as it always has, with a Minister, and the responsibility for calling that Minister to account lies, as it always has, with a departmental Committee set up by the Assembly.

Mr Dunne: I thank the First Minister for his statement. Can he clarify if it is necessary to wait until after 2016 to make changes to OFMDFM functions?

Mr P Robinson: The present timetable requires us to get a Bill through the House so that it becomes a Departments Act and to get a functions order through the Assembly. If we were to decide to reallocate the functions of any Department — the Member mentions OFMDFM's delivery functions — it could be

done legally and it could be done within the time that is allocated. I am not sure that there is a great advantage in making that change for what would probably end up being about eight or nine months, because you would be spreading those amongst the 11 existing Departments, as opposed to the eight other Departments that would be in place after the election. While it could be done, I do not see any real advantage in doing it, and it seems that the election and a new Assembly is the right time for the complete change to take place.

Mr Wilson: The cost savings that will result from this exercise are important during a time of financial restraint, but the real goal is to achieve much more efficient, joined-up and effective delivery of government. Can the First Minister outline how he believes this change will help us to move away from the silo mentality of separate Departments and lead to more strategic joined-up decision-making and policies?

Mr P Robinson: My friend is entirely correct in indicating what the purpose and value of the changes will be. While the silo mentality is ultimately in the minds of individuals as opposed to the structure of any Department, the fact that there will be fewer Departments obviously makes it easier for coordination and cooperation between them. There is also greater recognition that, as we mature as an Assembly, we need to look towards joined-up government and that Departments, even when you reduce them to the number that we have, will still have overlap and will still have the necessity to work with each other. I hope that the silo mentality will be removed from the minds of Ministers. The reductions that we have had and the savings that will flow from them are entirely in line with what we have been attempting to do at a time of great financial difficulty.

Of course, I recognise, and I should put on record, that we are putting a significant burden on our Civil Service, which is already having to handle significant change as a result of the reduction in size of the public service. This requires very careful work to ensure that front-line services are not adversely affected and will also involve moving staff around Departments. The Civil Service will therefore be under very considerable pressure over the next number of months, and we should put on record our appreciation. We can take a decision at an Executive meeting, in an implementation body or at Stormont House, but civil servants have to do the work on the ground to put it in place.

12.30 pm

Mr Allister: Reducing the Departments to nine is good, as far it goes; but I am more interested in democratising the appointment of Ministers to Departments. We are about to have a general election. If the Stormont system applied, Cameron, Miliband and Clegg would all end up in Downing Street, and there would be no Opposition. How absurd that would be — how unworkable, as this place demonstrates. When will we bring into line with the rest of the democratic world the way in which we appoint Ministers?

Mr P Robinson: When the Member joins with me and is able to convince other colleagues in this House that a voluntary coalition is the right way to go. I went to Stormont House, and I argued for that; however, we came out with the highest level of agreement possible. I recognise entirely that, as time goes on, we have to democratise and normalise the Assembly much more, and that can only be done if we get something akin to the system that we had at Westminster. I am not sure that his analogy was the best in the present circumstances: who knows who will be in the next Government of the United Kingdom?

Mr Agnew: How can the new Department of Education protect other children's services, particularly early years services for children before they start school, given the draw on resources by schools?

Mr P Robinson: This statement does not go into the allocation of funding. What will happen, I suspect, is that the Finance Minister, when looking at future Budgets, will look at the funds received for the various functions and pass them on to the new Department responsible. There will always be a call for more money for every element of government. Indeed, I could have argued a long time ago that children's functions should have gone to the Department of Education. It has now been recognised that all children's services, excepting those that relate to health, will be in the Department of Education, which is the right place for them in my view.

In terms of the finance, I hope that, when we come to the Budget, a more responsible attitude will be taken by some people in this House, who simply want to vote against a Budget, no matter what it is. When you allocate funds, it is always easy to look at the various permutations, but the hard decision has to be taken, and, in circumstances where our Budget has been massively reduced over the last

number of years because of decisions taken by the coalition Government, those decisions become harder and harder. By saving money, by reducing the number of Departments and their staff, we are taking a further step to the reform of public services that my colleague is taking forward.

Mr B McCrea: I ask the First Minister about silos and finances. As the First Minister will be aware, in-year monitoring rounds are important for the efficient management of government, but many of the surrenders of funds are complicated by historical factors. Some can be transferred within a Department; others must go back to the centre. When we amalgamate certain Departments, will he give an undertaking that we will ensure that we can do interdepartmental funding without having to return funds to the centre?

Mr P Robinson: My advice to the Finance Minister would be not to do that. To give any Minister the ability to move money around the various functions in a Department would be a retrograde step. The Executive, collectively, need to make the determination on each of the heads of expenditure and be satisfied that that is the right balance. It would be wrong for any Minister to take it out of balance.

As we go through a year, there will be circumstances where, if there are savings in one area, the Finance Minister can allocate them to other Departments or give flexibility to a Minister to use those savings in his or her Department. My view is that we are far better having a system where everything comes back to the centre and is reallocated. On that basis, you can look at a priority in a Department as opposed to what the priority might be in another Department; that is how money should be allocated.

When we enter a new Assembly and a new CSR period, all previous bets are off; it will be up to the Executive to take the decision about how funds are allocated in-year as well as over the Budget period.

Ms Sugden: I welcome the reduction in the number of Departments, but it acknowledges the Departments' failure to work together for efficiency and the betterment of Northern Ireland. How will the First Minister encourage his Executive to start working together right now so that we can hit the ground running when the changes are made?

Mr P Robinson: There needs to be an open and honest acknowledgement that no politician

in their right senses would have produced a government with 12 Departments, as was done here. It was done for entirely political reasons; it was done to have the maximum number of people in the Executive so that there would be a share-out to parties that were smaller than the main parties. It was done, no doubt, for the best of intentions; it was important to get as wide a buy-in to the process as possible.

None of that, whether it is nine Departments or 12, should stop colleagues working together effectively and efficiently. We are from different Departments, and there are coalitions that are much less successful than ours elsewhere in the world, including some not too far from where we are. There are difficulties in operating a coalition of any form. To have a mandatory coalition, where you are put into an Executive not because you have common views but because you have a percentage of the vote, shows just how difficult it is to operate. Much more credit should be given to the fact that, in spite of the massive ideological differences amongst the parties, they have been able to work to the level that they have together and that they have been able to reach some significant agreements.

Mr Beggs: I give a general welcome to the new departmental layout. I see savings and efficiencies coming from it, and there will also be an opportunity for better coordination to meet the needs of people. In terms of the operational aspects of the social investment fund, which are transferring to the Department of the community, which is largely built on DSD, is that a recognition of the delays in setting up the social investment fund and getting moneys out on the ground, and the inefficiency of having that duplication of service that already exists under DSD and local government?

Mr P Robinson: It is the same recognition that there is with every other delivery function that is being taken out of OFMDFM. We want to make the new Executive office a strategic Department rather than a delivery Department. That makes sense for the overview that we have and the role that we have of coordinating the Executive. It also makes sense because it is bound to be easier for one Minister to take a decision than it is for two Ministers to take a decision, no matter how agreeable they might be. The fact is that we have removed most, if not all, the delivery functions from the Executive office to make it a Department that will have a strategic overview of all the Executive's work, and, particularly, some of the issues that are allocated to it in policy terms.

Executive Committee Business

Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill: First Stage

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): I beg to introduce the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill [NIA 46/11-16], which is a Bill to amend the law relating to special education and disability discrimination in schools.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Wells (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 2 July 2014, contained in clause 5 and paragraphs 1 to 6 of the schedule dealing with the objectives of regulators of health and social care professionals.

In July of last year, the Secretary of State for Health, Jeremy Hunt MP, wrote to former Minister Poots seeking his agreement to a legislative consent motion (LCM) on provisions contained in a private Member's Bill that was introduced in Westminster in that same month by Jeremy Lefroy, the MP for Stafford. The full title of the Bill is the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Bill, and it has a wide patient-safety theme following on from the events at the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust.

At the outset, it is important to say that the vast majority of the provisions in the Bill apply to England only. Members will be aware that any Westminster Bill that seeks to introduce changes that relate to a devolved matter must be agreed by the Assembly by means of a legislative consent motion. One provision in the Bill relates to the regulation of health-care professionals, which is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland. A legislative consent motion is therefore required for the provision. It is that provision to which I now want to draw Members' attention.

The provision seeks to introduce an overarching public-protection objective for health-care professional regulators — for example, the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the General Dental Council — and the Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care, which oversees the work of the health-care regulators. It is intended that the provision will apply on a UK-wide basis. That is because, with the exception of pharmacy, the jurisdiction of the health-care professional regulators is UK-wide, as is the jurisdiction of the Professional Standards Authority.

The clause introduces an overarching objective of public protection, with further objectives relating to public safety, public confidence in the professions and proper professional standards, each of which are of equal importance. There is well-established case law setting out the expectation that regulators and their fitness-to-practise panels will consider those objectives. However, the Bill seeks to establish those explicitly and consistently in statute. In practice, that will give regulators a clear and consistent legal basis on which to act with confidence to ensure the protection of the public.

The approach of having an overarching public-protection objective, together with the three related objectives, secures the focus on public protection that regulators were keen to emphasise, while also ensuring that regulatory bodies are able to act, where appropriate, in the absence of any explicit patient-safety issue; for example, where a registrant has engaged in behaviour that might undermine public confidence in the profession to such a degree that it would make the public reluctant to seek that individual's help but where the issue is not related to professional competence or patient safety. The Bill also requires the regulators' panels and committees dealing with fitness-to-practise issues to have regard to the objectives. That will help contribute to ensuring ongoing public confidence in the professional regulatory system.

The Department of Health in England has confirmed that the Professional Standards Authority and the regulators affected are content with the regulatory provisions in the Bill. However, those bodies' general position is that the private Member's Bill does not go far enough, as the legal framework governing regulation of health-care professionals requires more significant reform.

12.45 pm

Members will be aware that the United Kingdom law commissions, including the Northern Ireland Law Commission, jointly undertook a review of the regulation of health-care professionals. They published their final report, together with a draft Bill, in April 2014, and a copy of that Bill was laid before the Assembly. The aim of the work was to make recommendations for a clear, modern and effective legal framework for now and for the future. In fact, the regulatory provisions in the private Member's Bill are derived from two of the commissions' key recommendations. The regulators and the Professional Standards Authority are eager for the commissions' reforms to be implemented as a priority.

On 29 January 2015, the UK Government issued a joint response to the commissions' report on behalf of the four United Kingdom Health Ministers. In the response, the Government accepted the large majority of the recommendations whilst acknowledging that further work will be required in some other areas. Government officials, including those from my Department, will continue to work constructively with the Department of Health in England, the other devolved Administrations and the bodies affected to progress those issues.

The response highlighted again that the UK Government remain committed to legislate in this important area when parliamentary time allows. In the interim, a number of pieces of secondary legislation have been introduced UK-wide to improve the regulatory bodies' processes in order to enhance patient safety and improve public confidence. The regulatory measure included in the private Member's Bill seeks to build on that.

Members should note that the private Member's Bill will not introduce the overarching public protection objective for either the General Medical Council, which regulates doctors on a UK-wide basis, or the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, which regulates pharmacists in Northern Ireland only. With regard to the Pharmaceutical Society, the Department of Health in England identified issues with applying the overarching public protection objective provision to the society. Whilst legislative amendments in 2012 enabled an enhanced role in public protection and regulatory activity for the society, its current objectives, set out in the Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, are more reflective of a leadership and membership organisation rather than one focused on public protection. Therefore, introduction of the new proposed public protection objective would represent a

fundamental change to the society's statutory basis.

I agree with the position taken by my ministerial colleague in England, and the Bill is not an appropriate vehicle to introduce such a change to the arrangements for regulation for the pharmacy profession in Northern Ireland. I also understand that the society has not raised any objections to its exclusion from the Bill.

I can also advise Members that I have asked departmental officials to begin preparatory work to explore options for the future arrangements for the regulation of the pharmacy profession in Northern Ireland. That will include consideration of the existing professional leadership role of the Pharmaceutical Society. I will continue to keep the Assembly and the Health Committee updated on that as work develops.

In relation to the General Medical Council, the overarching public protection objective will be introduced through a different UK-wide legislative order, which is being taken forward.

In conclusion, the UK Governments, including my Department, support the Bill as it relates to the regulation of health-care professionals. As this is a devolved matter, a legislative consent motion is required. It is important that the provisions extend to Northern Ireland to ensure that we retain parity with the rest of the United Kingdom in that regard so that the public in Northern Ireland can be assured that they are safeguarded in the same way and afforded the same protections as other UK citizens.

On that basis, I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: I take this opportunity to thank Minister Wells for bringing the LCM to the Assembly today. Speaking on behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the legislative consent motion. It is a somewhat unusual LCM, in that we are lending our support to a private Member's Bill progressing through Westminster. However, given that the UK Government are supporting the Bill and notwithstanding the reality that health care, including the role of health-care workers, is devolved, there is an understanding of maintaining a common framework for regulation across different jurisdictions, especially in the context of greater mobility between jurisdictions and even mobility by patients and those in care. It is important that we do what we can to enhance protection of those who are most vulnerable, maintain public confidence and uphold standards.

With those few words on this important issue, I am happy to relay the Alliance Party's agreement to the LCM.

Mr Speaker: With those few words, it is back to the Minister.

Mr Wells: I was expecting many more contributions. Maybe they have all been won over by my oratory; I do not know.

I welcome MLA McCarthy's comments. He makes a very valid observation that, more and more within the United Kingdom, patients and medical staff are moving back and forward across the borders of the four jurisdictions. Therefore, it is very important that we have parity and that members of the public in Northern Ireland feel that they have exactly the same regulatory framework as those in England, Scotland and Wales. I am glad to say that the standard of medical care in Northern Ireland is extremely high and the number of referrals to any regulatory body is a very small proportion of the number of engagements with patients. However, we all still need to have the confidence that, if things do go wrong, there is a very effective and rigorous framework in which to deal with it. I welcome the fact that the Member who contributed is supporting the Department in this.

As I said, the Bill will introduce a consistent overarching objective for the Professional Standards Authority and the regulators of the affected groups of health-care professionals, including dentists, nurses, midwives and opticians, and will ensure that public protection is at the heart of what the Professional Standards Authority and these professional regulators do. The Bill will contribute to public protection, by providing clarity and consistency across the roles of the PSA and these regulators, and will increase public confidence in the professional regulatory system.

It is important that Northern Ireland continues to retain parity with the rest of the UK in relation to the regulation of health-care professionals. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House. The legislative consent motion came before the Health Committee for scrutiny, and the Committee was broadly supportive of it. I welcome that. I suspect that the fact that the Committee has done much of the scrutiny work already is why this particular legislative consent motion has not attracted a great deal of debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 2 July 2014, contained in clause 5 and paragraphs 1 to 6 of the schedule dealing with the objectives of regulators of health and social care professionals.

Donaghadee Harbour (Transfer of Harbour Undertaking) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

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

That the Donaghadee Harbour (Transfer of Harbour Undertaking) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

The harbour is managed by my Department, overseen by the Donaghadee Harbour Commissioners, who are civil servants from my Department. Two staff, a harbour master and an assistant, are employed directly at the harbour. My Department is not well placed to manage a harbour or to oversee it remotely from Clarence Court. The focus has been on keeping the harbour open and as safe as is practicable, with due regard being given to its special heritage qualities.

More recently, our policy has been to transfer Donaghadee harbour from its current status as a trust port to that of a municipal harbour owned and managed by the relevant local authority. There are firm practical grounds supporting this option. Local councils are already harbour authorities and, therefore, competent to undertake the associated management responsibilities. The transfer would also address the practical difficulties and inefficiencies associated with operating a singleton harbour; for example, in arranging emergency cover and maximising the utilisation of the specialised harbour staff. It would also enable the anachronistic legislation associated with the harbour to be repealed. Sometimes words are easier written than said; I must speak again to my officials. *[Laughter.]* The transfer is linked to the review of public administration proposals and the reorganisation of councils and is, therefore, expected to happen in parallel with those changes from 1 April 2015. The order has been subject to public consultation in accordance with the Department's guidelines. My Department is grateful for the responses

that have been received to the consultation and notes that there were no objections to the order.

I am also grateful for the consideration that has been given to the proposal by my Executive colleagues and the Regional Development Committee. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has also considered the order and did not make any formal comments in his ninth report of this session. That has allowed the order to be brought forward to the debate to seek affirmation.

In summary, the order will transfer Donaghadee harbour from the commissioners to North Down and Ards District Council — *[Interruption.]* Ards Borough Council.

Miss M McIlveen: Ards.

Mr Hamilton: Ards and North Down.

Mr Kennedy: That might become a matter for resignation. I had better correct that. *[Laughter.]* That will include all the functions, property rights, liabilities and obligations. The two members of staff who are employed at the harbour will also transfer to the council, and that will be achieved through the promotion of a transfer scheme. The order will also seek to wind up and dissolve the existing commission. I, therefore, recommend the Donaghadee Harbour (Transfer of Harbour Undertaking) Order to the House.

Mr Clarke (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): The Committee for Regional Development considered the policy for the legislation at its meeting of 10 December 2014 and was content with the merits of the policy. The statutory rule came before members at the meeting of 18 February 2014, and members had no objections to it. The Committee for Regional Development, therefore, supports the motion.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the detail that the Minister has set out on the proposals. On behalf of Alliance Party council colleagues in the area and businesspeople who have been in touch with me, I seek his assurances that the transfer will be conducted with the harbour in an adequate state of repair.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the members and Chair of the Regional Development Committee for their positive support and the scrutiny that they have undertaken. I thank the Chair for that. I also indicate to Mr Lyttle that my officials have been in close consultation with council officials to resolve any outstanding issues. We

confidently expect those to be resolved in time for the transfer to take legal effect.

I am glad that the House has agreed the transfer of Donaghadee harbour. I am somewhat sorry to see it go. It never had a navy. Nonetheless, I think that the council will be best placed to undertake its management in the future. I wish all the staff involved well and thank them for their contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Donaghadee Harbour (Transfer of Harbour Undertaking) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion to affirm the first of three statutory rules from the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

Before I deal with the statutory rule, I will set out some background to the measure. The purpose of the legislation is to extend the empty shops rates concession. That was introduced in April 2012 and was subsequently extended for a further two years in April 2013. The concession was introduced as an amendment to the Rates Amendment Act (Northern Ireland) 2012. At that time, a package of measures was introduced to rebalance the rating system to assist ailing businesses and to improve the appearance of our town and city centres.

1.00 pm

The empty shops rates concession serves to provide a one-year concession which effectively allows 50% empty property relief to continue for one year when a qualifying property which has been empty for at least one year becomes occupied again.

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

The current legislative provision under article 31D of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, as inserted by the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, permits applications for this concession until 31 March 2015. The window for applications will close soon and, following the success of this scheme, I have made the decision to extend the application period to the end of the current Budget period.

Unfortunately, there remains a need to provide whatever assistance we can to counteract the many shop closures and the effect that this has had on the vitality of our towns and cities. The extension of this concession will allow Land and Property Services (LPS) to continue to receive applications for the scheme up until 31 March 2016.

This scheme has been a huge success. So far, it has seen 375 new businesses get up and running across Northern Ireland. Also, since the scheme was introduced in April 2012, data that was produced by the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium in February 2015 shows that the vacancy rate in Northern Ireland has reduced to 16.3%. Although the picture has improved slightly, I think that there is still a need for a scheme of this type.

The range of businesses that have benefited from the scheme include a fish market in Enniskillen, a children's clothes shop in Larne, a gift shop in Londonderry, a restaurant in Belfast city centre and a hotel in Ballycastle. They all created new jobs for local people.

I feel that this is a policy that makes a real difference to business start-ups, particularly in town centres and on arterial routes. Furthermore, it is a sensible measure in terms of cost. In all likelihood, the Executive would not have been getting any more revenue from these units through rates if they had continued to be empty. Therefore, it is effectively a cost-neutral policy.

Beyond that, after an initial period of reduced liability, these businesses will end up paying full rates after the difficult first year of trading is over, so it may even prove to bring in more money than it costs. Such has been the success of the scheme that similar schemes have now been introduced in all other parts of the United Kingdom. It was this Executive that led the way, having listened to and taken on board ideas from retailers and traders.

My Executive colleagues and members of the Finance and Personnel Committee have been advised on the detail of the statutory rule. The

Committee indicated that it was content for applications to be received for the empty shops rates concession until 31 March 2016. Article 1 of the order sets out the citation and commencement. Article 2 provides for the amendment of article 31D of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, substituting the new end date of 31 March 2016.

In conclusion, I look forward to Members' comments and commend the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 to the House.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

I thank the Minister for his remarks. As has been outlined by the Minister, the purpose of the rule is to amend paragraph 2 of article 31D of the Rates (NI) Order 1977. This would allow an extension for applications to the empty retail premises rate rebates scheme beyond the present March 2015 closing date until the end of the present Budget period in March 2016.

In 2012, the Committee was first advised of the initial proposal to provide 50% relief for one year to a new occupier of an empty shop. The initial scheme was limited to one year so as to reduce any unwanted displacement and minimise any advantage over established traders, and it also allowed the Department to review the success of the scheme during the initial period.

The Department undertook an early review of the scheme in 2013, which indicated that, although there had been a reasonable number of successful applicants throughout the time of the scheme, they were not evenly spread throughout the North and, as a result, the scheme was extended for two years. The purpose of the rule is to provide a further extension of the scheme to the end of this Budget period on 31 March 2016. The Committee formally considered the statutory rule that is before the Assembly at its meeting on 18 February. It also considered the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules, which raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny.

The Committee agreed to recommend that statutory rule 48/2015, the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (NI) 2015, be affirmed by the Assembly. I therefore support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member, the Chairman of the Committee, for his comments.

I agree with him. I believe that this is a scheme that is worth preserving as it has been a major success story for the Department and the Executive.

The Member mentioned the geographical spread of the 375 new premises that have opened as a result of the scheme. I think that we should celebrate the fact that 375, probably fast-approaching 400, as we speak, have been confirmed as using this relief. Those businesses are spread across every district council area of Northern Ireland. I commented on a few in my opening remarks. The bulk of those — 77 — are in the Belfast area, as you would probably expect them to be, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have visited many across Northern Ireland, as did my predecessor, and they do a range of things. That shows the success of the scheme.

The fact that the scheme has been extended for a further year will suggest to Members that the Department and I will do what we can to promote the scheme, but it is also incumbent on Members to promote the scheme in their own areas. By extending the scheme, we can help to ensure that more empty commercial properties are brought back into use, thereby improving the appearance of towns and creating jobs in communities. I ask Members to support the measure. I commend the order to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

This scheme was initially introduced in 2007 with the objective of encouraging and sustaining the provision of ATMs in rural areas. It was originally introduced in 2007 for a fixed period of three years, but it has been extended twice, following evaluation. The latest order provides for a further one-year extension for the

2015-16 Budget period until the end of March 2016.

It is not a big policy. It currently provides rates exemption to around 70 ATMs that would otherwise be liable for a separate rates bill of around £2,000 a year, but it is still an important policy for our rural communities. The number of ATMs that get the exemption has increased from 37 to 70 since the scheme was introduced. Perhaps, most importantly, the context has changed. It has done so in such a way that, I believe, this modest measure is even more important today than it was before, because of the closure of many rural bank branches.

If I may, I will outline what the scheme does. The exemption is provided for stand-alone ATMs that are individually valued in the valuation list, such as those located outside petrol stations or on high streets. It does not apply to those located in banks or building societies, which tend to be valued as part of that property.

The current cost of the scheme is around £130,000 in terms of revenue forgone. I consider that to be an affordable sum, given the benefits that it can bring. ATMs play an important role in the sustainability of rural economies. Evidence assessed by my Department demonstrated that money withdrawn locally is spent locally. Of every £10 withdrawn from a cash machine, almost two thirds is spent locally.

I turn now to the statutory rule itself. My Executive colleagues and members of the Finance and Personnel Committee have already been advised on its detail. The Committee indicated that it was content for individual, separately valued ATMs in designated rural areas to continue to be exempt from rates, particularly given the modest cost of the scheme.

Article 1 of the order sets out the citation, commencement and interpretation provisions, and article 2 provides for the extension of the relevant date, before which the scheme must end, to 1 April 2016.

In conclusion, I look forward to Members' comment and commend the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 to the House.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The purpose of this rule is to extend the current rates exemption for any ATM that is assessed

separately for rating purposes in a designated rural area from 31 March 2015 to 1 April 2016. ATMs that are located in banks or building societies tend to be valued as part of the property and are therefore not affected.

The exemption initially came into effect in 2007, and policy evaluations carried out in 2009 and 2012 showed increases in the number of rural ATMs. The Committee noted that, at present, Land and Property Services (LPS) has estimated that around 60 ATMs are covered by the scheme. The Department has estimated that the cost of the scheme in 2014-15 is just over £130,000, with an estimated cost of around £2,200 per ATM.

At its meeting on 14 January, the Committee considered the proposal to make the order. During that consideration, several points were raised about which designation of rural areas was being used for the scheme, who exactly assessed which of the machines was stand-alone or part of a building and who exactly would receive the exemption. The Committee was advised that NISRA provided the designation of rural areas, that the professional valuation officers from LPS assessed each ATM and decided whether it fell into the scheme's remit, and that the exemption would go to the individuals or group responsible for the stand-alone ATM.

On a minor technical point that I noted subsequent to the Committee receiving its briefing, perhaps the Minister could clarify why the rule provides for an extension to 1 April 2016, rather than 31 March, as has been the case in previous years.

The Committee was nonetheless satisfied with the Department's answers to its queries and had no objection to the policy proposals at that time. The formal statutory rule was subsequently considered at the Committee's meeting on 18 February 2015, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny.

The Committee agreed to recommend that the Assembly affirm statutory rule 46/2015, the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (NI) 2015.

As a rural MLA, I also support the motion on a party basis. I recall, as a councillor and an MLA, lobbying for many years to get ATMs in villages. I am sure that every rural MLA has done the same. This is a very worthwhile proposal. It is worth continuing, as it provides a

great service to young and old alike in our countryside villages and towns.

Mr Hamilton: I again thank the Committee Chair for his comments. He raised a couple of issues, one of which I think he already received clarification from officials on, concerning what was designated rural. He is right that it was NISRA that helped to define the designated rural wards where ATMs would benefit from this exemption. When the legislation was first passed in 2007, over 200 wards were prescribed as rural. My Department will be redesignating the wards at the earliest opportunity once, stemming from the ongoing council restructuring, the settlement information is available from NISRA.

He asked about 1 April 2016. There seems to be no particular reason why that, as opposed to 31 March, is there. Perhaps it was thought that a wee change was required to see whether anybody noticed. Far be it from me to pre-empt what the House might do in future, but, as the Member highlighted, this is a good scheme. I do not foresee it disappearing any time soon, particularly at a time when bank branches everywhere are closing, especially in rural areas. I see that Mr McCarthy, Mr Nesbitt and Miss McIlveen are in the House. They and I represent the Strangford constituency, and we know how important this is in places like Portaferry, for example, where we can recall the last remaining bank branch closing. This scheme has helped to retain a stand-alone ATM that belongs to that bank in the village. The proposal is helpful in retaining that important service that I think most of the House appreciates. Even if you do not represent a rural area, you will appreciate the importance of having ATMs and that service in the local area.

By extending the scheme, we can help to ensure that ATMs are retained and perhaps even increased in rural wards, providing greater access and support to those communities.

I ask Members to support the measure, and I commend the order to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

Rates (Owners Allowances) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Rates (Owners Allowances) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

The final order today is the Rates (Owners Allowances) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015. Before turning to the order itself, I think that it is important to provide Members with some brief context to the statutory rule.

1.15 pm

The first point that I make is that the rating system that has served us and previous Administrations for over 160 years is founded on the principle that the occupier pays. That works pretty well, given that rates are a charge for regional and local services. However, there are practical difficulties in strictly adhering to the principle when it comes to rented domestic property, because of the problems associated with recovering unpaid rates from tenants, who tend to move about more in lower- and average-value houses. That is not a new phenomenon, which is why landlord allowances are a long-standing feature of the domestic rating system here. Various discounts are given to landlords in return for collecting rates from tenants and passing them on to Land and Property Services (LPS). It helps revenue collection. At the moment, the allowances vary, depending on whether they relate to compulsory or voluntary landlord liability, and there are differences between the private rented sector and the social rented sector.

Members may well jump to the conclusion of asking why we should give landlords anything by way of discount. I can understand why Members might think that, but I reiterate that, in essence, rates are an occupier-based charge. Even if the landlord is liable to hand over payment to LPS, the tenant still pays the rates through the rent, and the landlord is effectively acting as a collection agent.

There is another key point to make — one that sometimes gets drowned out — which is that landlords' representatives have consistently told us that they do not want anything to do with rate collection. Their preference is to have no liability at all for the payment of rates to the Department, as is the case in the rest of the UK with council tax. Therefore, to impose a duty on a landlord to collect rates, as part of the rent, from the person who lives in the house and not

make an allowance for it would represent a major shift in policy. It is not something that we can contemplate without undertaking a lot more research and consultation. For that reason, I wish to initiate a fundamental review of the whole policy area later this year, and I have asked my Department to factor that into its plans.

The order that we are debating today has the effect of creating a unified rate of compensatory allowance across all sectors and categories of liability. It will not affect the level of rates paid by tenants as part of their rent. Under the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, there are two types of landlord liability for domestic property. The first falls under the compulsory liability provisions in article 20 of the 1977 Order. Landlords who fall within that provision must pay the rates on the property. The second falls under article 21 of the 1977 Order. That provision allows landlords to volunteer to pay rates on their property through a formal agreement with Land and Property Services. The landlord allowance is currently 7·5% for compulsory liability landlords. A 12·5% allowance is provided for voluntary liability landlords in the private rented sector, while in the social rented sector it is 10%. The changes that I am taking forward in this order have been informed and supported by a public consultation and are aimed at simplifying the system.

It is appropriate at this point to acknowledge the key role that the Finance Committee played during 2013 and 2014 in a detailed discussion of the issues surrounding the rating of the rental sector. Some of the small but important changes arising from the outcomes of that consultation process were implemented through the Financial Provisions Act (NI) 2014. The provisions in today's order see the final outcome from that consultation being implemented.

I turn now to the detail of the order. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as 1 April 2015. Article 2 increases from 7·5% to 10% any allowance given to a property owner who is rated under the compulsory liability provisions in article 20 of the 1977 order. Article 2 also provides that the increase in allowance will not apply to a rate made for a year ending before 1 April 2015. Article 3 then serves to reduce from 12·5% to 10% the maximum allowance that can be given to a property owner who, under article 21 of the 1977 Order, agrees to pay the rates chargeable for a property whether it is occupied or not and who pays those rates on or before the date or dates specified in the agreement.

Article 4 substitutes 10% for any allowance in an existing agreement made under article 21 of the 1977 Order between the Department and a person or body other than a housing association or the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, as housing associations and the Housing Executive already receive a 10% allowance. Article 5 serves to revoke the Rates (Payments by Owners by Agreement) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2011.

I look forward to hearing Members' comments, and I commend the order to the House.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas Cheann Comhairle. The purpose of the rule is threefold. The first aspect is to increase the allowance or discount that the Department provides to landlords — owners — who are subject to compulsory provisions under the Rates (NI) Order 1977.

A landlord who is responsible for rates payments under certain criteria receives an allowance of 7·5% provided that payment is made before 30 September or within one month of billing, whichever is the later. This rule aims to increase that allowance to 10%.

The second aspect is to reduce the maximum allowance, or discount, provided for by a rates payment agreement between the Department and landlords. Landlords whose rent is paid or collected at intervals shorter than quarterly may, by agreement with the Department, undertake to pay the rates chargeable in respect of the hereditament whether it is occupied or not. The Department may agree, where the owners so undertake and pay the Department on or before the date or dates specified in the agreement the amounts payable by him thereunder, to make an allowance not exceeding 12·5%. The order reduces this maximum allowance to 10%.

The rule also seeks to substitute 10% for any allowance in an existing agreement made under the 1977 Order between the Department and a person or body other than a housing association or the Housing Executive.

The formal statutory rule before the Assembly today was considered by the Committee in February, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Rates (Owner Allowances) Order (NI) 2015, be affirmed by the Assembly. I, therefore, support the motion.

Mr Hamilton: I was worrying, Mr Deputy Speaker, that a debate might have kicked off.

I thank Mr McKay for his contribution to the debate on behalf of the Committee. I will be very brief. I trust that Members will show the necessary support to the order and back the Committee in its work. Therefore, I commend the order to the Assembly and ask Members to affirm the order before us today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Owners Allowances) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 be affirmed.

Committee Business

Children's Services Co-operation Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 3 July 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill [NIA Bill 44/11-16].

As Chair of the Committee, I ask for the support of Members today. The Children's Services Co-operation Bill passed its Second Stage at the Assembly on 26 January. It was then referred to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for Committee Stage. We put out a public call for evidence, and we also wrote directly to stakeholders. The closing date was last week. However, written submissions are still being received by the Committee office, and our first oral evidence session in connection with the Bill will be heard by the Committee this week.

The Bill requires Departments to discharge their functions and to cooperate to further the achievement of six high-level outcomes for children and young people. Those are taken from the strategy and are as follows: being healthy; enjoying learning and achieving; living in safety and with stability; experiencing economic and environmental well-being; contributing positively to community and society; and living in a society that respects

their rights. The Bill also creates an enabling power to allow Departments to pool budgets.

The Committee received a briefing from the Bill's sponsor, Mr Agnew, on 14 January following the Bill's introduction, and we also heard from officials from the Department on the same date. Although it is a short Bill, it is clear from the discussions to date that there are a number of issues that require more detailed consideration by the Committee. Indeed, I highlighted some of them during the Second Stage debate. Both Mr Agnew and departmental officials have already signalled potential amendments that could address some of the issues raised, and the Committee expects to be kept fully apprised of developments throughout the Committee Stage.

There is a lot of work to be done, even though it is a short Bill. Indeed, earlier today, the First Minister, in his statement regarding the reconfiguration of Departments, made it clear that there will be some significant impact on the delivery of services for children and young people. We need to take time, as a Committee, to consider the implications of that for Mr Agnew's Bill.

The Committee believes that it is essential that it is afforded more time to fully examine the Bill and to properly exercise its scrutiny role, not just for the Bill but for business coming out of the Committee, which I regard as our primary duty. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I ask that the House supports the motion to extend the Committee Stage to 3 July 2015.

Mr Attwood: I obviously support all the comments made by the Committee Chair. I only want to make the point that we have in or around 40 sitting weeks before the end of the mandate. Given the time frame and the points that the Chair has just made in respect of the reconfiguration of the Departments, that certain functions relating to children will be transferred to one or more than one of the new Departments, it is urgent that we get this through the business of the Committee and the House. It will require maximum effort from OFMDFM to ensure that there is a fair wind and every opportunity for the Bill to come back to the Floor before the next mandate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Does the Chairman of the Committee have concluding remarks?

Mr Nesbitt: I have some very short concluding remarks. I concur with Mr Attwood. Given the timescales, it is important that we get on with it,

and we cannot get on with it without the cooperation of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We look forward to its urgent and detailed engagement in this matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 3 July 2015, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill [NIA Bill 44/11-16].

STEM in Schools

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

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the recent publication of the Education and Training Inspectorate's evaluation of the implementation of the World Around Us, the Confederation of British Industry's 'Step Change: A new approach for schools in Northern Ireland' report, Momentum's digital sector action plan and the Engineering UK 2015 report, all of which highlight the importance of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in schools; recognises the role of STEM as a key driver of the economy; and calls on the Minister of Education to support and encourage the full implementation of the STEM aspects of the curriculum in order to bring about high quality learning for all children.

The skills required for today's job market are very different from those needed when I and, indeed, other Committee members were at school. The world is vastly different, and, thanks to technology, it is a much smaller place. It is paramount that our education system equips all our young people with the skills and knowledge to excel in the modern world.

The Education Committee has been lobbied by a number of interested groups in respect of the teaching of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in schools. The Committee has held information events

involving schoolchildren and a wide variety of stakeholder organisations. Members also had the great pleasure of visiting the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition in January and meeting the enthusiastic and extremely knowledgeable pupils from our local schools competing in that very prestigious competition.

The Committee noted with great interest a number of recent reports, which are referenced in the motion. You will be glad to hear, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I do not propose to put forward for debate everything that is in all those publications, but I would like to touch on a small number of key points, and I will rely on my Committee colleagues to fill in any salient matters that have been missed.

When the Committee is lobbied by educational groups, there is a common theme: they want us to make a part of the revised curriculum compulsory. Some of the suggestions, relating to science, for example, are extremely persuasive. They have gained the Committee's support and, I believe, are worthy of at least some further study by the Department.

STEM learning and teaching, both in primary and post-primary schools, is of particular interest to the Committee. The motion indicates that STEM is a key driver of our economy, both current and future, and it is for that reason that the Committee has sought this debate.

Today, I anticipate that most of the Committee's commentary will focus on science, technology and engineering rather than on mathematics, but that is not to undermine the critical importance of the latter.

1.30 pm

In primary schools, science teaching at Key Stage 2 is largely based on an element of the curriculum called the World Around Us. That combines science, geography and history and is designed to allow teachers the flexibility to tailor delivery and engender interest in science while also preparing students for more in-depth study later in their school life. Lobby groups such as the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Association for Science Education have expressed concerns about blending other subjects with science. They feel that this has led to a reduction in the science content of teaching at primary schools. They are also worried about a reported lack of inquiry-based learning, which they see as central to a good and rounded education for all children.

The trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) in 2011 found that just 13% of year 6 pupils in Northern Ireland were taught by teachers who emphasised science investigation in lessons, compared with around 40% in England and the Irish Republic. TIMSS also found that teachers had relatively limited confidence in the delivery of science at primary school. Furthermore, the Committee noted the relatively low level of uptake of science options by primary school student teachers at both university colleges.

The Committee raised some of those issues with the Department, and we were subsequently advised that the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) would undertake a review of the World Around Us. ETI found much of what the Committee expected: good practice in many schools but also a lack of definition of science in the curriculum and a need for improved linkages to the levels of progression. ETI also found some suggestion of, if not an overcrowded curriculum, at least some "initiative overload". Members noted with interest suggestions that there tended to be a lack of inquiry-based learning and limited provision of planned opportunities for problem-solving and investigation. ETI found that, despite the good practice, the science and technology strand of the World Around Us is still underdeveloped in 54% of primary schools.

Those findings have much resonance with the evidence from the lobby groups that I referred to. The Committee welcomes ETI's recommendations, including the promotion of science in initial teacher education as well as the use of a baseline of science education in primary schools and better tracking of pupil progression in STEM.

As you are aware, the motion also references the CBI's 'Step Change' report and the Engineering UK report, and members agreed with the sentiments of both reports, particularly the recognition of the importance of science subjects and computing at post-primary level and the value of the Success through STEM strategy. Members, however, do not necessarily endorse all the recommendations in those reports.

The motion also refers to Momentum's digital strategy action plan. That report highlights the value of learning computer coding in primary schools. Although the Committee welcomes initiatives like IT's Your Choice: A Computer Programming Continuum for Schools, members felt that there was limited information on current levels of formal and informal computer-coding teaching in schools. There is, therefore, a need

for a formal use of baselines on this aspect of learning. This would be only sensible and should pre-empt any further policy decisions on altering the curriculum in this regard. There is clearly good practice and excellent STEM teaching at very many of our schools. Evidence of that was provided last week when, as part of the NI Science Festival, children attempted the largest practical science lesson in the world.

The Committee is not suggesting that the Minister reinvent the wheel on STEM education, nor is the Committee suggesting that he presses Ctrl-Alt-Delete and recodes completely the way in which science is taught in schools. Rather, the Committee is calling for the Minister to reflect on the ETI review and the other reports, apply the scientific method of evidence-based decision-making and take the next steps to provide a consistent STEM educational experience for all our children.

In closing, I would like to make two additional points. First, Members were concerned to learn that the software systems development A level, as well as other applied A levels, are not recognised by universities in the Irish Republic. I ask the Minister, in his response, to comment on the portability of applied STEM and other A levels to other jurisdictions, as it has the potential to impose a massive roadblock to the educational progression of our young people.

Finally, I would like to make reference to Sentinus. Members were surprised to learn that the organisation, which has a leading role in promoting STEM in schools, is facing a possible significant cut to its budget. Perhaps the Minister will confirm if that is the case, and, if so, can he explain how the decision and the possible loss of match funding fits in with the Success through STEM strategy? At that juncture, I will close my remarks.

Mr Rogers: I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak on this particular topic. STEM subjects are not simply a collection of facts and figures but an active and practical way of investigating the natural world. To me, it is the experimentation that brings the learning alive. I am concerned, as are other members of the Education Committee, that, particularly in our primary schools, science is being delivered a bit like any other academic subject, without the messy learning and experimentation.

We have the World Around Us as an integral part of the curriculum, but science and technology are buried in that curriculum area, along with history and geography. The primary-school experience is the essential foundation

and building block of our children's learning. Children in those early years are sponges for learning. That creativity and sense of adventure need to be satisfied early. Children will stop asking the question, "Why?", if, for years, they do not get a satisfactory answer.

I taught mathematics and computing in the secondary sector for many years. Frequently, I would meet children of 11 who said that they hated maths, but, in most cases, when you answered the "Why?", they gained the confidence. They never got to the stage of loving maths, but they got their GCSE. The same is true for other STEM subjects and can be even more profound. You will not turn a 14-year-old on to physics if the only physics experience is their physics text book.

I remember well the early days of computer coding at Queen's in the 1970s and teaching it in the 1980s. Then, we had the ICT revolution, but if we are to advance the next generation, it must be more than simply learning about word processing, spreadsheets and slide shows. We must teach our children to problem solve, code and design programmes that perform useful functions. Learning to send emails is useful, but it will not make a talented software engineer. All too often, the real computer whizz is not the teacher at the white board but the student at the back of the class who is programming in their spare time.

One of the barriers is the lack of qualified STEM teachers, especially in our primary schools, with only around 1%. Most STEM graduates are snapped up and choose more lucrative careers. The lack of time and resources for quality continuing professional development for science teachers can lead teachers to play safe and be less adventurous in the science experiences that they deliver in the classroom. We have some excellent examples, but, at best, it is sporadic.

The lack of adventure is encouraged by a system that does not judge the quality of practical science delivered or learned by students. School practice is driven by what teachers believe is valued by ETI. Everything in education is driven by grades. Students want better grades as their passport and schools want to climb the league tables. By removing the contribution of practical work to grades, you inevitably remove the value of practical work.

The digital world has changed beyond all recognition in the last 30 years, but our education system needs to get up to speed. If we are to succeed in the globally competitive world, we need to learn from other countries,

find our technical niches and occupy them early in primary school.

We must ensure that we have a sufficient number of talented teachers in key subject areas if we are to have a highly skilled workforce necessary for our future economy. We need subject specialists who can inspire students with their own passion. Many teachers are crying out for that extra support and the opportunity to develop their teaching skills and subject knowledge. We must ensure that young people are equipped for the challenges of the 21st century through improving the teaching of programming and ICT. It is expected that we will need an extra 20,000 people in that sector over the next three years. That can only be achieved by working to ensure continuity of demand for the region and the knowledge economy whilst ensuring that the skills pool continues to be populated so that we have a talented pool of people to meet the growing demand.

We must ensure that our curriculum is future-proofed. Computer programming and coding is already part of the curriculum in some areas, including in two of our nearest neighbours, England and the Republic. While we welcome workers from others areas, will our students be at a disadvantage when applying for jobs in the digital economy? Digital opportunities are huge, both economically and socially, because technology is such a great leveller. Children can rise to the top based on aptitude and ability irrespective of their gender or background. There are more and more job opportunities in the technology sector — more now than ever before.

To meet the long-term recruitment challenge, education is, as I said before, the foundation of building our economy.

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

Mr Rogers: Minister, there are two things. First, we must ensure that the place of STEM subjects is strengthened in the World Around Us and, secondly, must raise the status of our teaching profession to the height that it deserves.

Mrs Overend: The importance of matching the skills set of our young people coming through school into the world of work to the demands of the workplace is a central issue that we must focus on and is yet another example where proper, working, joined-up government would be successful. As a mother of three children,

aged 14, 12 and nine, I am acutely aware of how I try to influence how my children choose their subjects and think about their future careers, but, ultimately, the school has the responsibility to nurture every child's skills and talents and open up their education to what is out there in the world.

In the first nine months of my job in this place, I was a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, and it heard from various employer organisations and representatives groups that emphasised that there were not enough people with the right skills available to meet the demands of the Northern Ireland workplace. We often hear of the fantastic job opportunities that are brought about by successful companies in Northern Ireland as well as by foreign direct investment companies that come to Northern Ireland, but it is really important that we keep on top of the supply of those skills to enable our economy to improve and to build Northern Ireland. That analysis in the Employment and Learning Committee led to an inquiry into the careers advisory service, primarily on how our young people find out about careers, what we should be promoting and what subjects are necessary to supply the workers that are needed.

That focus goes further. Not only do we need to give our young people the right advice about their future career, but we need to take the skills focus right back to the beginning; not just to post-primary education but right down to primary education. It is very often the case that the earlier our young people learn about a subject, the better their understanding will be and an interest will be sparked to learn more. We have heard that in years gone by about the teaching of languages being started at primary school, and it is also the case with STEM subjects, including computer coding, which we are hearing so much more about.

To me, this debate is a no-brainer. If our business economy is demanding workers with skills in science, technology, engineering and maths, we must find better ways of providing the workforce to meet those demands. This debate is timely given the recent series of events associated with the Northern Ireland Science Festival and the fact that the recent half-term break would have seen lots of schoolchildren travel to W5 at the Odyssey to get a taste of the wonder of science.

The Committee motion refers to several recent reports on STEM. We could add the 2008 MATRIX report from the Northern Ireland Science Industry Panel and the STEM review a year later, which produced a report that was

jointly published by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education. Out of the same review came the STEM strategy, which was developed and endorsed in March 2011 by the Executive and taken forward by a cross-cutting implementation group, of which Joanne Stuart OBE was the chairperson.

1.45 pm

Mrs Stuart highlighted in the one-year progress report published in 2012 the skills mismatch, which, she argued, could hold back the growth of the Northern Ireland economy. That remains the acid test. Has there been the growth in the numbers of young people taking up these subjects at school and then in higher or further education to provide the skills reservoir to fill the high-tech jobs that we expect to be created here in the next few years? Are young people being encouraged to study STEM subjects and to choose careers in those important sectors of the economy? There has been a slow upward trend in the number of A-level STEM entries, with 10,702 STEM entries in 2004-05 rising to 12,659 in 2010-11. That is a fairly underwhelming increase, might I say, and I hope that the Education Minister can reassure the House that recent figures show more positive trends.

Is there political leadership in the Assembly? Mr Deputy Speaker, judging by what I have witnessed in the Education Committee, I have my doubts. I do not hear the Education Minister promoting the STEM agenda as our priority for the curriculum. Far too often, I hear at Question Time after Question Time —

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

Mrs Overend: — an obsession with getting rid of academic selection and a blatantly partisan promotion of Irish-medium education. Mr Deputy Speaker, I will leave it there; I support the motion.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this and apologise to the Chair for missing the start. If I have missed anything that she has covered, I will pick it up afterwards.

We welcome the opportunity to talk about the importance of STEM subjects and their role in our education system today and into the future as we build an economy that works better for everybody. However, it is not all bad. STEM

subjects are fairly well established in our schools. The recent report identified some areas as needing improvement, but we have a fairly good platform to start from. We see brilliant examples of good practice in our schools, at primary and post-primary level. It is important, therefore, that we do not get carried away and turn this into some sort of crisis. That is simply not the case: there is an increase in those taking and doing well in STEM subjects. We have an increasing number of STEM-facilitated local businesses every year, for which the revised curriculum and entitlement framework was largely responsible a number of years ago.

Indeed, it is for that reason that I am surprised at the criticism from the last Member to speak of the "obsession" with academic selection. It has always been about widening the scope for those at school and involving those who are interested in engineering and the sciences without having to go down the one route. That flexibility is very important. Young people studying the World Around Us get to apply what they learn in science not just in the classroom; when they go into the garden they can ask questions. Building in our young people a sense of enquiry — why does something happen and why is it important? — is very important if we are to see an increase in small and medium-sized enterprises locally. That requires the ability in our young people, which they get from science study and notions of enquiry, to take a risk.

We must also appreciate that there is more to STEM than science: it includes technologies, design, engineering and maths. It is important that we do not get bogged down in the old notion that there are just biology, chemistry and physics. STEM is a lot more than that.

STEM subjects are certainly not just for boys. Recently, according to an article in the 'Guardian', children were asked as homework to talk about a famous scientist. What did he look like? Was he married? Did he have a family? One child's mother was a scientist. We need to get beyond that. In the North, we certainly do better than many other areas. The imbalance between boys and girls is certainly not what it is elsewhere: young girls are taking up STEM subjects more and more. It is great to see that because there is far more to STEM subjects than some people envisage. At the BT Young Scientist and Technology Exhibition 2015 last month, we saw huge numbers of young women from across the island engaging in science, technology and design. We met a young winner from a couple of years ago, who

was hugely inspiring. It is important to get as many young women involved as possible.

Inspiration is a big thing. South Down supplies huge numbers to the Civil Service and the public sector. We perhaps do not have as many small enterprises as we should, yet Hans Sloane and William Thomson, known to others as Lord Kelvin, came from this part of the world. They are huge figures in science. We could do more to inspire our young people to look up to scientists because, as I said, we have a very proud record. Some of the greatest scientific discoveries have been made by Irish people. I mentioned Hans Sloane, and it is important that we venerate such people and help young people to know what they did. Perhaps it is time that we looked at having a greater number of STEM-related scholarships so that our young people can really get the benefit.

It is important that we do not just see STEM as the golden nugget that will deliver a wonderful economy and a far better education service. Modern languages need to come into the mix, and we should not forget the arts. As well as the likes of Hans Sloane, south Down is very proud to have Francis Hutcheson, so philosophy and culture are also very important. We need to make sure that, when we talk about STEM, we are creating far more rounded individuals as well. We should not forget other subjects.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hazzard: I will indeed.

Mr McCausland: Does the Member share my appreciation of the fact that, when he mentions William Thomson — Lord Kelvin — Hans Sloane and Francis Hutcheson, he mentions three of the individuals who are pre-eminent in the contribution of the Ulster Scots to the history of Northern Ireland?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member will be pleased to know that he has an extra minute to answer that one.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for his comment, and I agree: the Irish Scots were very important throughout the world. Francis Hutcheson went on to inspire many people who took part in the American Revolution. Indeed, he inspired many people around my part of the world — Ballynahinch and Saintfield — into the United Irishmen. He talked about democracy —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hazzard: I will indeed. Go ahead.

Mr B McCrea: We should mention John Stewart Bell. We are just after naming a crescent after him. He came from Tates Avenue, and he was nominated for the Nobel prize in physics. He proved Einstein wrong. Unfortunately, he died before he could be given the prize.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for his intervention. We could probably get a phone book out and go through lots of names of different people who did lots of things. When we talk about scientists, it is important that we realise that we have massive figures in our shared history, such as Francis Hutcheson, who did so much for the world of education, philosophy and everything else. We should look to use the example of those people to inspire our young people.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion and agree with just about everything that the other parties have said so far. I confess that I was not expecting to hear selection, the Irish language or Ulster Scots mentioned in the debate, but there we are.

The value of, and necessity for, STEM subjects being prioritised has long been advocated by the CBI, and by industry generally. We now have all the various reports — they have been listed, so I will not list them again — that are clearly making the same case. In that respect, we are only going to follow the rest of the world, particularly the major economies of India and China. Although we cannot expect to compete with them numerically, there is absolutely no reason why we should not develop as a centre of excellence in the areas of STEM and digital technology. We have had considerable success there, which really only confirms the untapped potential that there still is. I pay tribute to the companies operating in those areas, many of which are home-grown, that have already established in Northern Ireland. We have a good base to build on, but we risk running out of qualified personnel if we do not get this right.

It is generally agreed now that the process starts at primary level. That is a relatively new development, but it is good to see. I agree with Chris Hazzard that this is not a critical motion and that we do not need to dwell on any failure. We could do better, but things are not all bad by any means. There is a general upsurge in enthusiasm. I pay particular tribute to the primary schools that have embraced this and to the excellent work of Sentinus and BT. The

biggest science lesson in the world was referred to as well. You have only to go to one of those events, whether it be at primary or secondary level, to see the enthusiasm of the children at any age. It really is marvellous.

For my sins, I have two grandsons, one of whom has just turned 10 and the other has just turned seven, who ask me questions now and I think, "Where did they get that from?" They get it from the World Around Us. *[Interruption.]* Mr Kinahan wants to know whether I can answer them, but it is with some difficulty.

The level of education they are receiving and their level of interest in it is quite startling, even at that age. That is what is, perhaps, at the nub of this issue. The World Around Us is very wide-ranging. It is a mixture of science, history and geography, as the Chairperson said, and you would wonder about the advisability of that particular mix and whether there is a need to concentrate more effort purely on the scientific side of it. I do not know the answer, but it is certainly worth looking at.

There is also, as Members have mentioned and the various reports have alluded to, a lack of confidence among teachers, particularly at primary level, in their ability to deliver the curriculum of the World Around Us because it is so broad-ranging. I note statistics in the ETI report that show that 87% of schools have a staff member with specific knowledge, two thirds have a staff member with a specific qualification, but only 37% have specific STEM course accreditation. Another statistic that catches my eye is that 93% of schools use external expertise but do not cluster sufficiently, and primary schools rarely use expertise from post-primary level. There is work to be done there as well to make it more efficient and effective.

The CBI's 'Step Change' report advocates something fairly radical, which is switching the focus from exam results to real-life preparation. I would have to tread carefully there but I know what it is getting at; it is advocating vocational A levels. I cannot help thinking that this is, perhaps, the way to go.

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

Mr Lunn: I will quickly make the point that advocating vocational A levels and trying to increase the number of places to provide those vocational A levels does not fit too well with increasing the number of teachers in training when we do not need that number of teachers.

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

Mr Lunn: It is taking away from the DEL budget and it could be reprioritised.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Order. As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Nelson McCausland.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): I inform Members that questions 2 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Older People's Strategy

1. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their strategy for improving the lives of older people. (AQO 7677/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): The purpose of the Active Ageing strategy is to transform attitudes to and services for older people. It is important that we fully acknowledge the enormous contribution that older people make to our society and that we challenge the negative stereotyping of older people. The strategy, when published, will provide direction for Departments' policies, make connections between strategies and lead to the improvement of services for older people.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

In developing the draft strategy, we have worked closely with the Commissioner for Older People and the ageing strategy advisory group, which includes older people and people working for organisations that represent older people as members. Officials met the advisory group on Wednesday 25 February and plan to hold a workshop later this month to finalise outcomes and work with our statisticians to develop indicators and discuss the final draft of the strategy, which, once finalised, will be subject to

Committee consideration and endorsement by the Executive. Subject to that approval, we hope to publish the Active Ageing strategy in the coming weeks. The draft indicators for the strategy, which will establish baselines on current levels of need and will be used to monitor the implementation of the strategy, will be issued for public consultation in the near future.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer and for the vital work that is being done for that group of vulnerable people within our society. Has any thought been given, under the Delivering Social Change network, to some sort of a cross-departmental signature project that might be particularly targeted towards the needs of our older people?

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly think that, in the context of developing an Active Ageing strategy for older people, it is incumbent on all Departments to recognise their responsibility and to give whatever additionality they can to supporting older people, who deserve to be supported and have made massive contributions towards the development of our economy and society down the ages. If the Member has any particular ideas or suggestions, both the junior Ministers, Jonathan Bell and Jennifer McCann, would be only too happy to speak to him. I certainly think that, if that cross-cutting work can work to the benefit of older people in a way that delivers more for them, our Department, the First Minister, myself and the junior Ministers will be very supportive of what the Member has just said.

Mr Kinahan: I wonder if the deputy First Minister shares my concerns at the fact that clear-up rates for crimes against older people are only 9% when, in fact, they are 17% for other groups, meaning that they really have less protection.

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly would be very concerned about those figures. What that does is place a huge responsibility on all of us, not least the Police Service, to ensure that we continue to examine ways in which we can support older people.

Fear of crime is a big issue for older people. In all the dialogue and discussions that there have been with the stakeholders and the Commissioner for Older People and in other conversations with older people, that has come through as one of the main areas of concern. I certainly agree with the Member that, in going forward, we have to look at what more we can

do, and the police have to look at what more they can do. This is a huge issue for society. All of us — the Police Service, the voluntary and community sector, local communities and politicians — have to work together to identify what need there is and to see whether we can bring forward solutions.

Mr McCarthy: The deputy First Minister will be aware that, on more than one occasion, this Assembly or previous Assemblies have supported the idea of help with personal care for our elderly people when they need it. Will he bring forward or help to bring forward some idea that would prevent our older people having to sell the roof over their heads to pay for elderly care in their twilight years?

Mr M McGuinness: That has been a concern for a lot of people in recent times. In our view, the strategic aims will improve existing services to ensure that they best meet the needs of older people. In addition, we have worked with Departments to tackle the challenges facing older people, and those will be taken forward in phases. Obviously, the Member identifies a key issue, because that engenders concern and fear about the future in the minds of a lot of older people. It represents one of the further challenges that we have to deal with in the time ahead. The issue has been raised in conversations with the Commissioner for Older People and individual stakeholders, which include an awful lot of older people. We need to look at what more can be done.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Will the Minister outline any projects that will support the Active Ageing strategy?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said, the whole purpose of the strategic aims is to improve existing services and ensure that they best meet the needs of older people. In addition, we have worked with Departments on projects that will support the Active Ageing strategy to tackle all the challenges that face our older people. That will be taken forward in phases.

The first phase will involve programmes whereby resources have already been identified to make them happen. Those include things like encouraging and helping the new councils to sign up to the World Health Organization's age-friendly environment programme; a project to tackle fuel poverty; affordable warmth; tackling fear of crime; increasing the engagement of older people with policymakers; increasing digital inclusion; and a new mental capacity Bill. Additional resources will be required for the remaining programme

proposals. Subject to funding being available, they will be prioritised and will subsequently form the second phase of the implementation of that strategy.

Age Discrimination Legislation

3. **Ms Fearon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on age discrimination in relation to goods, facilities and services legislation. (AQO 7679/11-15)

8. **Mr Weir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of legislation to eliminate age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services. (AQO 7684/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister McCann will answer.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 8 together.

On 19 February, the First Minister and deputy First Minister made a written statement to the Assembly about the Programme for Government commitment to extend legislation to give legal protection from unfair age discrimination by those providing goods, facilities and services (GFS). The proposed new legislation will apply to people aged 16 and over. The aim of the new legislation is to protect all people aged 16 and over from discrimination because of their age when accessing goods, facilities and services. That will put age discrimination outside work on a similar footing to discrimination law in employment. It sends out a clear message that ageist attitudes and practices are as unacceptable in service provision as they are in the workplace. Subject to Executive agreement, we intend to bring forward a consultation document in the near future setting out our proposals on the matter.

Following consultation, we will consider all the options that are available to us for bringing the legislation before the Assembly.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Would she be supportive of future legislation to allow for the inclusion of under-16s in respect of age discrimination in GFS?

Ms J McCann: I am most definitely supportive of more inclusive legislation to stop age

discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services, and we will continue to work with the children and young people's sector to progress the full extension of age discrimination legislation. The current agreement on the scope of the legislation means that, where previously no one had protection against age discrimination, we now have the most advanced legislation on these islands for people aged 16 and over.

Mr Weir: I thank the junior Minister for her answers so far. Will she outline the timetable for the implementation of such legislation? Does she envisage it being implemented in this mandate?

Ms J McCann: The Member will know that it is a Programme for Government commitment. We have been working with officials. We recently agreed the scope of the legislation and are looking at how we can take it forward. There will obviously be the consultation period, but we are looking at all the possibilities to try to bring the legislation forward in this mandate.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. The Minister said that she will consider extending age discrimination provisions to people under 16 in the future. Why can she not do that now?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware that we could not get political consensus on that issue. I would have preferred to have been able to say that the age discrimination legislation would cover all ages, but we have to remember that we are where we are. The main gap in the anti-discrimination law here is that, at the moment, there is no protection from age discrimination for any age in the provision of goods facilities and services, so this is a move in the right direction and a move forward. As I said in my previous answer, I hope that we can work towards getting that legislation for everyone. That would put us in a better place.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the junior Minister for her update on the issue and welcome the long overdue progress on legislation to protect people from age discrimination. The older person's parliament in particular will welcome this long overdue announcement. What did the Minister make of the evidence that was given to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister about those under 16 who have been excluded from the legislation? In that evidence, there were assurances that exemptions could be delivered

that should allow the legislation to be extended to all ages.

Ms J McCann: I reiterate my previous answer to the Member. He will know that I have spoken to members of the Committee inside and outside of the Committee. I wish that I was standing here saying that the legislation would cover all ages. I certainly believe that that would have been better legislation, particularly as it is anti-discrimination law. I will endeavour to work towards that. We will be protecting people who are over 16. We do not have anything on that at all at the moment, so this is a step in the right direction. I hope that we will be able to see progress at some stage and that I will be able to say that it will cover all ages.

Mr B McCrea: With regard to age discrimination, does the Minister consider that the use of voluntary redundancy and vacancy control may discriminate against younger people? When she is considering legislation in future, will she undertake to address the imbalance between ages old and ages young? That is a serious issue for our society.

Ms J McCann: I am not sure what the Member means about voluntary redundancy. Voluntary redundancy is obviously just that: you take it because you want it. In the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we have responsibility for equality legislation and the policy on equality issues. Certainly, if the Member wants to come and discuss the issue with me, the other junior Minister or indeed the First Minister or deputy First Minister, he would be most welcome.

2.15 pm

Social Investment Fund: Applications

5. **Ms Sugden** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their responsibility for informing applicants to the social investment fund as to whether their application has been successful. (AQO 7681/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann: In keeping with the community-based ethos of the social investment fund, zonal steering groups made the final decisions on projects that were selected for their area plans. Individuals or groups that were involved

with concepts which did not make it into the area plans were advised at the time. The area plans were submitted in February 2013. When the zonal allocations were subsequently announced, the steering groups were asked to prioritise their area plan projects again in their assigned zonal budgets. This process was completed by November 2013. The steering groups should have informed those involved of the decisions. If anyone is still in doubt, they should contact their zone's steering group directly. Contact details for these steering groups can be found on the NI Direct website.

Ms Sugden: I think that this whole process is actually quite empty. The fact that you are referring us back to a steering group that obviously knows as much as you do about this is quite disappointing. Was any money actually in place when this process was first announced, and is there any money in place to fulfil the many applications?

Ms J McCann: The Member would know that in her area, quite a bit of progress has been made. Her area covers three zones; Derry, the western zone and the northern zone. Around £50 million has already been committed in letters of offer and projects that have already started. While the money is not in the baseline of the OFMDFM budget because it is, in fact, an Executive budget, there is a clear indication that when the money needs to be drawn down, it will be drawn down.

It is really the responsibility of local steering groups to, if you like, inform the areas and projects that were unsuccessful. Those local steering groups were set up for the purpose, first of all, of deciding which particular projects they wanted to bring forward. They should also encompass, if you like, members of the community, the voluntary sector and other statutory organisations so that those individuals form a clear, wide membership of those steering groups.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister outline the process for ensuring that letters of offer to social investment fund projects will be taken forward in a timely and efficient manner?

Ms J McCann: Obviously, as I said, it is good news that the majority of projects are now progressing, but we are aware that a small number of projects still have not reached full approval stage. Officials are refocusing efforts to secure the business case approval on all remaining projects in the allocations for each zone. Steering groups are aware of this. While

we have to be sure that all projects are fit for purpose and demonstrate value for money, we remain committed to ensuring that all projects in affordability levels are approved, letters of offer issued and projects commenced as soon as possible in order to get the benefits from the social investment programme. Again, I just want to say that we are working with people and the local steering groups to try to ensure that these projects are brought forward as quickly as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: I do not think that I have ever heard the words "timely and efficient" being used to describe the social investment fund, since £30 million has been underspent as it is. The junior Minister referred only to money that has been promised as opposed to having actually been spent. Can the junior Minister outline what evaluation and monitoring methods are deployed with regard to the social investment fund?

Ms J McCann: First of all, I want to say to the Member that she is actually wrong because two projects have actually started. They are the Coleraine rural and urban network in the northern zone and the Bryson Street Surgery in east Belfast. There are a number of projects. I can give the Member a list of many that will be taking work forward soon. I say again that while this money has not been in OFMDFM's baseline, it has been allocated. Almost £50 million has been offered through letters of offer and everything else. So, I think that it is disingenuous of the Member to say —

Mrs D Kelly: I think that it is disingenuous of you —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms J McCann: If you want the whole plan of it and to know how it has been rolled out, I will certainly give that to the Member in written form.

Mr Speaker: It is very far from in order to interrupt a Minister in the middle of an answer. I will not tolerate that.

Mrs Overend: Is the junior Minister aware that applicants in my area did not even know that there was such a thing as a steering group or know how to contact it? What key things have you learned about the roll-out of the social investment fund?

Ms J McCann: Different areas must have different ways of working the steering groups.

Some of the steering groups that I know in west Belfast and, indeed, in the south-eastern zone, are made up of members of the local community and members of voluntary and statutory organisations. Once they were clear on what projects they wanted brought forward, they brought in members from the statutory groups or the business community to whichever projects they wanted to deliver. They work closely together, not only by way of the steering group working together, but through work with other policies and programmes like neighbourhood renewal, for instance, or with people in the council who are involved in community planning. Local people are designing the projects for their areas. The make-up of steering groups should, obviously, be from local areas.

T:BUC: Shared Campuses

6. **Mr McAleer** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the shared campuses element of Together: Building a United Community. (AQO 7682/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The development of 10 shared education campuses is one of the seven headline actions announced alongside Together: Building a United Community. The programme was launched by the Department of Education in January 2014, and 16 applications were received under the first call for expressions of interest. In July 2014, the first three projects to be supported were announced as shared STEM and sixth-form facilities in St Mary's High School, Limavady and Limavady High School; a shared education campus, incorporating Moy Regional Controlled Primary School and St John's Primary School, Moy; and a shared education campus, incorporating Ballycastle High School and Cross and Passion College, Ballycastle. Project boards for those three schemes have been established, and detailed economic appraisals, including technical feasibility studies, are under way. Exact costs will not be known until the appraisals have been successfully completed.

A second call for expressions of interest opened on 1 October 2014, with a deadline for submissions of 30 January 2015, and a further six proposals involving more than 20 schools have been received in response to that second call. The expressions of interest received were for Marmount shared sports facility; IQ centre, north Belfast; Brookeborough shared education campus; Digital Derry; Duneane and Moneynick partners in learning; and Cookstown SEED centre. The first four of those projects were

unsuccessful under the first call and have reapplied under the second call. Those applications are now being assessed, and it is hoped that the successful projects under the second tranche will be announced in June 2015.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister provide us with a progress update on the Lisanelly shared education campus in Omagh?

Mr M McGuinness: The Lisanelly shared education campus programme is, as many people know, additional to the Together: Building a United Community commitment of 10 shared campuses included in the headline actions. I can report that very good progress is being made. The first phase of construction, which is at Arvalee School and Resource Centre, is expected to commence in the current financial year, with the school becoming fully operational in September 2016. Work is also continuing to develop the overall exemplar of campus design and to prepare the wider site.

The Lisanelly shared education campus is additional to the Together: Building a United Community commitment and is mentioned in the strategy in the context of enhancing overall shared education provision through the creation of the 10 shared campuses that are to be based on the Lisanelly model. Six schools in total are relocating to the Lisanelly shared education campus. Those are Arvalee School and Resource Centre; Christian Brothers Grammar School; Loreto Grammar School; Omagh Academy; Omagh High School; and Sacred Heart College.

This is a totemic project, and one that has generated huge interest in County Tyrone and further afield. I know that a lot of people are looking at it very carefully. I think that, in the context of the Stormont House negotiations, which the First Minister and I and others were involved in, the fact that the project was in the pipeline greatly assisted us in achieving the half a billion pounds that we achieved for use in integrated and shared education.

Mr Dallat: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. I do not disagree with a single syllable of it, but, given the seriousness of the situation, in that not a single peace wall has been dismantled and paramilitaries are still flourishing, is this shared campus experiment sufficiently funded and will it really encourage the peace and reconciliation that the people voted for in 1998?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that there is a very strong view on the Executive and, indeed, among the parties that negotiated the Stormont House Agreement that the achievement of the £500 million — half a billion pounds — to bring our young people together in shared education campuses and to support integrated education is a very worthwhile project as we continue to build for the future. There are clear and ongoing examples of people making an effort to come together. I know that considerable discussion is taking place between officials from the Department of Justice and people on either side of the horrid so-called peace walls that exist in Belfast to see whether we can continue to meet the target that we have set ourselves to bring those peace walls down.

Absolutely essential to all of that is the leadership that is shown in the Assembly and between political parties. I described the Stormont House Agreement as an opportunity for a fresh start, and I think that we all need to seize that opportunity so that we can continue to build confidence in the political process and between communities. If I may say so even in this conversation, I warmly welcome the fact that the Loyalist Londonderry Bands Forum will make a presentation to the Sinn Féin and their this weekend in Derry city. I think that all of that represents a big effort being made by people on all sides to see what unites us, as opposed to what divides us. The sort of leadership that is being shown in the city of Derry is something that could be followed everywhere.

Mr Lyttle: What level and type of shared contact will occur between pupils in shared education of this kind?

Mr M McGuinness: Essentially, the opportunities for shared education right across all the work that schools are involved in are clearly there for all of us to see. The fact that the Lisanelly campus, for example, is seen as a totemic project and is being looked at by schools all over the North of Ireland and, indeed, further afield clearly shows that people recognise that there are opportunities to bring people together. That is the case not just in the context of sixth-form lessons. If more people are brought onto shared sites, we will see a level of contact that we have not seen in the past. It will be a real opportunity to have people working together and sharing, for example, restaurant, canteen and sporting facilities.

The First Minister and I recently met people from Brookeborough in County Fermanagh. I have to say that it was inspirational to listen to

the sort of leadership they were giving. The recognition that they understand is given to these projects will hugely benefit our young people in all sorts of ways — through their education; through sport, drama and arts; and through a whole range of issues.

2.30 pm

Of course, key to all of it is the leadership being given in these institutions. I think that that leadership is being given. People recognise the value of bringing our people together and ensuring that, as much as we possibly can within the challenges that we face, we continue to integrate our young people with a view to ensuring that it pays dividends in the future in moving to a much more peaceful and less divided society.

Mr Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

OFMDFM: St Patrick's Day US Trip

T1. **Mrs Hale** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, as part of their trip to the US for St Patrick's Day, they expect to promote Northern Ireland as a good place to invest. (AQT 2181/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Well, I have been very privileged in this job, going back to when the DUP and Sinn Féin first agreed, with others, to go into government together in 2007, to work on how we can develop, as a central plank of our economy, the attraction of foreign direct investment to the North. The late Rev Ian Paisley and I had a very successful visit in December 2007, and since then I have worked very closely with the First Minister, Peter Robinson, all over the United States of America. In the course of that work we have managed, even against the backdrop of a very cruel world economic recession, to attract more foreign direct investment jobs to the North than at any other time in the history of the state.

Quite clearly, there is an open door for us in the United States, whether it be in California, Chicago, New York or Washington. We had, during our stewardship of OFMDFM, a very important economic investment conference right in the State Department, from which flowed many of the new job announcements that we are now seeing on a very regular basis. I believe that we will continue with a very positive message and, against the success of the Stormont House Agreement, make it absolutely clear to everybody that we are open

for business. In the context of the debate around corporation tax, it is quite obvious to all of us that there are great opportunities, as well as challenges, that lie ahead.

Mrs Hale: Deputy First Minister, you anticipated part of my supplementary question. Do you agree that the sooner we have the devolution of corporation tax and know the rate at which it will be set, the better it will be for Invest NI and the Executive to attract more jobs to Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: I certainly do agree, and the First Minister and I have been involved in discussions around that. It will also be discussed during the course of the party leaders' implementation meetings. When you consider the sort of access we have in going to the United States and actually meeting President Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and others, you can clearly see that there is incredible interest in the ongoing success of the peace process here.

There is also tremendous interest in supporting economic development here. In the course of our conversations, we recognise that Invest NI has a very important job to do, and we need to give it as much support as we possibly can. That means coming, as quickly to possible, to an agreement on time frames and on the rate that we strike. Of course, in the meantime we have to await the finalisation of the legislation in the House of Commons, but I am confident that the decisions that have to be made will be made in a very expedient way, with a view to ensuring that we garner as much opportunity as we possibly can.

Faith Communities: Protections

T2. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they believe that improvements could be made in the Executive in affording more protections to faith communities in Northern Ireland. (AQT 2182/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: I think that there are tremendous protections for faith communities in the North of Ireland, and I have a tremendous respect for all of the Churches and the contributions that they have made through what has been a very challenging time for us in terms of the political process, and also the tremendous work that the Churches do in bringing people together.

The point that the Member mentioned obviously has some currency in relation to the ongoing

discussions. I understand that there was an important meeting between the Bishop of Down and Connor and the DUP last week. It was quite interesting that there was also a meeting between me and the Bishop of Down and Connor a week before that. Obviously, the Churches have a very great interest in meeting politicians. As we go forward, we have to ensure that we have a very fine balance between the rights of faith communities and minorities in our society, because a chief responsibility of the Assembly and the Executive is to ensure that we protect the rights of everyone and that there is equality for everyone whilst, at the same time, not denying anyone the right to practise their faith.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer and welcome the fact of his church attendance in the last couple of weeks. Will the deputy First Minister give us some indication, bearing in mind that he made the point that faith is not just reserved for the Christian community but is broader, of whether he has any objections to the issue of the protection and the rights of people of faith being included in the commission that was recommended by the Stormont House Agreement? Has he any objections to that being part of it?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that the Member mentioning my attendance at church in recent times is a bit bizarre. I am a regular church attender, and sometimes I go there with the First Minister and, indeed, with others when the occasion demands. I have a huge respect for all Churches. As someone who is a Catholic, I try to be the best Catholic that I possibly can be. At the same time, during the Stormont House negotiations, the purpose of the commission that we agreed was to deal with the whole issue of flags, symbols and emblems, and I think that that would be stretching the remit, although I am certainly open to conversations during the party leaders' meeting around the issue that the Member raised. I know that he is very close to his own faith. I know some people who are very close to him also, and he knows that I know them, and he knows that I have a great admiration and respect for them, even though they come from a completely different religious position from mine.

I think that we all have to respect each other. We have to recognise that the whole issue of religion can be very divisive and very damaging to our society. We only have to look further afield to what is happening in other parts of the world to see the atrocious activities of groups like ISIS and the way in which it targets

religions of all descriptions and carries out mass murder in order to get its own way. So, hopefully we are a society —

Mr Allister: You are talking about mass murder?

Mr M McGuinness: — that is emerging successfully from conflict, and I think that the vast majority of the Members, with the exception of maybe one in the House, sing from the same hymn sheet as I do on this.

Mr Speaker: I intend to make this the last time that I warn Members. If you interrupt a Minister in the middle of an answer — that is, you are preventing everybody else from hearing the answer — I will take action. I hope that that is as clear as it can be.

Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly: Progress

T3. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of development at Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly. (AQT 2183/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: I am very delighted to be able to say that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and I were in Ballykelly less than two weeks ago with the local community and with representatives of all the political parties — the Ulster Unionists, the DUP, the SDLP and Sinn Féin. I am not sure whether there were any Alliance members there but there probably were. We were there to view the ongoing demolition of military buildings on the site so that we can begin the process of relocating an entire Department, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, to the Ballykelly site.

When the Ballykelly site first came into our ownership, many people thought that it would be a hindrance to the Executive and that it would cost us money to maintain. It cost us some initial funds, but I believe that they were well spent. The site is twice the size of the Maze/Long Kesh site. The First Minister and I have been involved in some 40 expressions of interest from people who wish to go onto the site. We are absolutely confident that we can create thousands of new jobs on the Ballykelly site, which will be a major boost for people in Derry city, Limavady and the Coleraine area, not to mention Ballykelly itself, so the whole of County Derry and wider afield will benefit through the site's development. It is a very

encouraging and optimistic message, and I believe that it will be a success.

Mr Cree: I thank the deputy First Minister for that. I was at Ballykelly recently with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee to have a look around and I must say that I was surprised at the number of buildings, which are in all sorts of condition. I wonder whether it is anticipated that any of those buildings will be retained.

Mr M McGuinness: I believe that some of them will be retained and refurbished. The First Minister and I have spoken to people who are looking to take out a short-term lease during this year for the next nine months. They have a project that is ready to go. Without breaking confidentiality, it is a very exciting project. For that to work for them, it will require the utilisation of some buildings on the site.

Shackleton Barracks, Ballykelly: Private Investment

T4. **Mr G Robinson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the potential number of jobs that could be created by private investment in the 740-acre Ballykelly site, as well as the relocation of DARD HQ jobs to Ballykelly. (AQT 2184/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: When a Member get up to ask a question, it is always hard to know what the question will be. However, in the case of the Member for East Londonderry, it was highly predictable that his question would be about Ballykelly. I know that he has a tremendous interest in the development of the site in the interests of the people of the constituency. From that point of view, we sing from the same hymn sheet.

We are absolutely confident about this. Apart from the relocation of DARD's headquarters to the site and NI Water's interest in a project on it, many other expressions of interest have come from private companies, some of them from overseas. Even at this stage, we can predict that, when fully developed on the site, there will be thousands of new jobs. God knows where I will be 10 years from now, but I think that people will remember the decision to use the site to see, over the next short while, what level of interest there is as we sell off lots. As the Member said, it is an absolutely massive site, so we can predict that it will be very successfully exploited for the purpose of putting our people into work.

Mr Speaker: A quick supplementary question, Mr Robinson.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the opposition of political parties to any redevelopment of the Ballykelly site could be damaging to the economic future of the north-west?

Mr M McGuinness: I was surprised to hear that reservations were being expressed. I will not use this exercise as an opportunity to score party political points, except to say that this is a wonderful site and there are tremendous opportunities. The First Minister and I are absolutely determined that we will exploit the development of the site for the benefit of business, bringing in foreign direct investment and putting our people into work. That will be a massive benefit to the whole of County Derry, as I call it, or County Londonderry, as you call it.

Mr Speaker: Mr Alastair Ross, I am afraid that I do not have enough time for you to ask a supplementary question, but if you put your question, you will get an answer.

Mr Ross: I will be as succinct as I can, Mr Speaker.

MLAs: Reduction in Number

T5. **Mr Ross** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that it is now time that we act to make the Assembly smaller by reducing the number of Assembly Members and, if so, whether they see any reason why that could not be done by 2016, given that, earlier today, the First Minister outlined the new names and functions of the smaller Executive, which will be good for efficiency and for saving money, and reform within the public sector is under way. (AQ 2185/11-15)

2.45 pm

Mr M McGuinness: We have an agreement. It is in the Stormont House Agreement that we will deal with the reduction in the number of MLAs by 2021, when the election after the one in 2016 will take place. Speaking personally, I have no difficulty at all with the reductions, except to say that, because the current number was part of the Good Friday Agreement and did not change during the discussions on the St Andrews Agreement, the reality is that we will require the support of all the parties who signed up to the Good Friday Agreement and who supported it in the referendum. I know that

reservations about the speed of all of this have been expressed by the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP. I think that this matter will essentially have to be processed through the party leaders' meetings. We are determined to deal with the issue, but it has to be in a way that brings everybody on board.

Education

St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen: New Build

1. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposal for a new build at St Joseph's High School, Crossmaglen. (AQO 7691/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The first draft of the feasibility study for the new build at St Joseph's High School was submitted to the Department in week ending 20 February 2015. When the feasibility study has been signed off, the Department will undertake an economic appraisal and business case. DFP approval will be required for this business case due to the value of the project. Provided that there is no delay due to issues with the feasibility study, it is anticipated that business case approval could be obtained as early as April 2015. The procurement of the integrated design team to take forward the project as a design and build will be carried out in tandem with the preparation of the business case. However, the appointment cannot be made until the approval of the business case is obtained. This project is still at early planning stage and hence there is not yet a programme time frame available for the build and design.

Mr D Bradley: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Seo an chéad lá de Sheachtain na Gaeilge agus tá súil agam go ndéanfaidh gach Comhalta a dhícheall a oiread Gaeilge agus is féidir a labhairt le linn Sheachtain na Gaeilge. I thank the Minister. It is, of course, the first day of Irish Language Week, so I urge all Members to do their best to use Irish during their questions or answers.

As I said, I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will know that I have raised this issue on a number of occasions, and he has responded very positively by visiting the school and through his announcement of funding. Can the Minister give us an assurance that his Department will facilitate the new-build process in every way possible?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I thank the Member for his question, and I welcome his comments about Seachtain na Gaeilge.

I can assure the Member that I am wedded to this project. My Department and I are driving it forward, and he will note even from my answer that we are working our way through the project. It is quite a significant public investment, and we have to follow the proper protocol and policies, not only of my Department but of DFP. I think that things are moving forward well, and, without being pre-emptive, if we can get the business case approved by April, that will move us to the next stage.

Mr Irwin: While the Minister is answering questions about my constituency, can he let us know whether he will prioritise a new build for Markethill High School in County Armagh?

Mr O'Dowd: We have quite a significant number of schools in our estate at primary level and post-primary level that require new builds or significant investment. I am not in a position to announce any further building programmes at this stage. How the budget, particularly the capital budget, works out through 2015-16 will decide whether any future capital investment announcements are made during this Assembly term. It may be the duty of the next Assembly or the next Minister to make announcements around future builds in the years beyond 2015-16, but I continue to keep the situation under review.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers to date. There is a good presentation here in relation to capital build projects in Newry and Armagh. Will the Minister take this opportunity to give an update on capital projects across the North?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I have made a number of announcements since coming into post. In 2012, I made an announcement of 18 projects, valued at £133 million. Eight school builds are now on site. Arvalee special school is due to go on site in March 2015, with a further five going on site early in the start of the next financial year. St Gerard's resource centre is now complete. In 2013, there was an announcement of a total of 22 projects, valued at £222 million. Currently, there are eight business cases approved, and work is progressing well on the remainder.

Eight of the projects are expected to move on to site in 2015-16, subject to availability of capital in subsequent years. I also made an announcement in 2014. The projects are at the very early stage of planning and are going through the appropriate policy development and business cases etc. It is vital that we are able to announce capital builds because it takes a significant number of years from announcement to put a new build on site. So, we do that years in advance, and we have to ensure that the money is there to follow that up.

Unfortunately, my Department's capital budget is not what I would like to have seen, and I am sure that that is the case for my Executive colleagues as well. We all want to see further investment in capital across the Executive, but I will keep the situation under review, and if I believe that it is appropriate to make an announcement of further capital builds for years going forward, I will do so later in 2015.

Mr Speaker: Questions 3, 4 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Pupil Dropouts: Year 13/Year 14

2. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of young people who fail to complete years 13 and 14 of full-time education. (AQO 7692/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of pupils who fail to complete years 13 and 14 is relatively small. The school leavers' survey shows that, in 2012-13, some 522 pupils left post-primary school without completing year 13, and 305 left without completing year 14. The survey also shows that the majority of those pupils — 76% of those leaving year 13 and 71 % of those leaving year 14 — went on to further education colleges, employment or training.

Many of those who fail to complete year 13 or year 14 do so because they are not content with their chosen pathway and decide to change direction. It is important, therefore, that young people are supported in making the right choices at the right time. Effective and timely careers guidance is important to support young people in making informed choices. That is why I welcomed the recent review of the joint DE/DEL careers strategy, which found that the strategy is sound and has resulted in significant improvements in the delivery of careers education over the past four years.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. Whilst it is a small number, I would

be interested to know how many make an in-year change and then decide to change to a college. When I was 16, I went to Lisburn college, realised that the course was not for me and went back to secondary school to do A levels. Those statistics would provide an interesting insight. What further steps can be taken to try to minimise the type of change that takes place, because there is a cost to the taxpayer, and there is a lost opportunity to the young people who are involved? What more can be done to try to limit those experiences that we are having?

Mr O'Dowd: I know that the Member has asked questions previously in relation to this matter, and some statistics were provided at that stage. It is when and how the statistics are gathered and provided that will illuminate as to some of the points that you made in relation to whether young people make those choices at the start of the year or the middle of the year. I suspect that it is a mixture of both, but I will investigate to see whether we have the detail to answer the question that you have posed.

In relation to how we ensure that young people make the right choices, it is down to careers advice. It is down to ensuring that young people are fully informed of the career options that they have and the pathways that they will have to follow and where those pathways will lead them if they make certain subject choices. As I mentioned in my original answer to you, the recent review of the careers strategy has been quite positive, pointing out that we are beginning to make positive changes to careers advice and that young people are now receiving much-improved careers advice from that given in previous years, but we will continue to keep that matter under review.

Mr Rogers: Minister, you rightly put the emphasis on the careers education programme. What discussions have you had with the Department for Employment and Learning to bring forward the recommendations from the careers review?

Mr O'Dowd: I have had discussions directly with the Minister, and my officials are in discussion with his officials about the matter. We are continuing to investigate how to bring forward the recommendations of the review, particularly given the constrained budgetary period for both Departments.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far, and it is good to hear that there are so few. Has the Minister thought about or even discussed with officials the idea that has

been suggested in the UK of extending the school years to include 17- and 18-year-olds or adding some flexibility into the system?

Mr O'Dowd: I think the Member is referring to the compulsory age of leaving school being 17 or 18, and I think it is worth exploring. I am not proactively doing that, but people's lifestyles are changing, and the figures show that more and more young people stay in education beyond the age of 16, 17 or 18. Our career pathways are changing, our education system is changing and, indeed, the skills bases that employers require are changing. As we all know, we are also expected to work longer, so it is important that we start looking back down the track at how long our young people should stay in school. It will be a wide-ranging debate with implications for a significant number of Departments, but I think that it will have positive outcomes for young people and may well have a positive outcome for the economy, and, whether or not I have the opportunity to explore it during this term in office, I believe that it is something that our society and the Executive need to start discussing in detail.

Lisanelly Stakeholder Group

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the work of the Lisanelly education campus stakeholder group. (AQO 7695/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. The Lisanelly shared education campus (LSEC) community stakeholder group held its inaugural meeting in December 2014 and is due to meet again in the near future. The group includes representation from the district council, community organisations and statutory bodies. Its main focus is to contribute to the achievement of the vision and objectives of the LSEC programme through a process of ongoing two-way engagement that allows for consideration of issues that may impact on the local community. The group will achieve this by exploring how opportunities and benefits for the Omagh area can be maximised in economic, social and community regeneration objectives.

Following the group's first meeting, reflecting the areas discussed and ideas generated, my Department, in conjunction with other Departments and relevant organisations, is examining the provision of additional community services and facilities that may be provided on the site. Progress will be communicated to the group at its next meeting.

As part of a wider communication strategy, work has also commenced to develop an overarching brand and vision for the campus. My Department has written to the community stakeholder group asking for its involvement in that exercise. Members of the group will be consulted to ensure that the views of the local community, young people and other key stakeholders on the development of the site and brand are captured.

I would also note that, at the request of the group, Omagh Youth Council has nominated two of its members to sit on the group. This will help to ensure the views of young people and potential LSEC pupils are captured and taken account of.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can I thank the Minister for his answer and his pioneering work in leading this iconic Lisanelly education campus. Can the Minister indicate the key milestones that are up ahead for the project, for this calendar year and for future calendar years? Are we on course for the 2020 opening — is it? — of the schools that will be on the site? What are the key milestones up ahead?

Mr O'Dowd: The key milestone up ahead is the starting of Arvalee special needs school, and that is on track. We are on track to have schools on site towards 2020. There has been significant progress made over the last year and a half in moving the project forward.

It is the biggest capital project that the Executive are involved in. It is a massive investment in shared education and in the Omagh area. I know that, at times, progress has been frustrating for the local community, but we are now back on track and are ensuring that things are moving forward.

3.00 pm

Arvalee School is expected to open in September 2016. A contract for site-wide demolition was recently awarded, and work has commenced on the site. Planning of future phases of development is ongoing in close consultation with the relevant schools and schools authority. It is expected that construction of the five post-primary schools will commence in 2017, with the campus opening in September 2020. We are moving ahead, and, after long years of visioning, talking and planning the project, physical work is taking place on the site, and employment is being generated in the community. Schools in the Omagh area are at the very heart of planning

the site. As I said in my original answer, many aspects of the community are involved in it.

Mr Buchanan: Minister, progress has been slow and very frustrating. You said that it would be open by 2020: is that subject to funding, or will it take place on the ground in 2020?

Mr O'Dowd: Unfortunately, everything in this life is subject to funding. It is part of our forward planning, and, when we sit down to talk about capital for future years, the Lisanelly site is always front and centre because it is a Programme for Government commitment. There have been delays in the past, but we are determined to deliver it on time. Arvalee School is expected to open in September 2016, and work will commence on that very shortly. People will then have the confidence that the site is for real, that the schools are moving on to it, and that the Executive will deliver on their Programme for Government target.

Mr Lyttle: What level and type of contact does the Minister hope for between pupils at shared education of that kind? How will he know if it has been achieved?

Mr O'Dowd: I wish for maximum sharing on the site. The local schools are involved in discussions on how and when to use the facilities. It is about how schools use them together and how the young people on the site create a common identity but with schools with a different ethos on the site. There should be a common identity among pupils attending the Lisanelly education campus and being proud of that corporate identity.

How will we know that it has worked? I think that the commitment of the local schools and stakeholders in Omagh will make it work. I have no doubt that, over many years, there will be much scrutiny and many case studies of the Lisanelly site. At times, there will be a steep learning process for some, but what encourages me, as Minister, is that people are willing to learn and to challenge one another and themselves about the shared education site at Omagh. It is a pathfinder project that offers massive opportunities for the community of Omagh and, indeed, across the North.

SEN Students: Statements

6. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Education how he is accelerating and streamlining the process of statementing for special educational needs students in mainstream post-primary schools. (AQO 7696/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My proposals, following the review of SEN and inclusion, contain measures to reduce the time for completion of statutory assessments for SEN children in all schools. The proposals also aim to reduce the administration around statementing. I propose a reduction to 20 weeks in the time frame for statutory assessment and statementing. A revised statutory code of practice will set out practical arrangements for the Education Authority and schools to meet a child's special educational needs. That will follow provision in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill and the supporting regulations. The revised code will describe the new processes for three levels of support and the respective duties of boards of governors and the authority. It will complement the anticipated streamlined process following the creation of the Education Authority. To reduce the administrative burden associated with annual reviews of statements, I propose that some reviews will provide an opportunity for a swifter process. That would require parents and schools to be fully satisfied with the current provision in a statement. Parents and schools would both have to agree that a review involving other advice-givers is not necessary.

The Department will indicate to the authority and schools the acceptable time frames for completion of assessment and provision of supports. Ongoing capacity-building training for special educational needs coordinators has been delivered to ensure that schools are fully informed of the processes for the identification and assessment of children's needs. I intend that to be supplemented by training for each school and board of governors on the new SEN framework prior to implementation.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answer. I did not quite catch whether he said that he hopes to reduce the processing time to 20 weeks or that it is 20 weeks at the moment. Could he clarify that point, when he rises to speak again?

Does he accept that the time taken for assessments is too long and is affecting the development of some students?

Mr O'Dowd: The current time frame is 26 weeks. We wish to reduce that to 20 weeks in the legislation and regulations.

I note that the Member has been asking a significant number of questions for written answer on special educational needs, and I am more than happy for my officials to meet him to discuss the issues of concern to him. There are clearly issues that he is bearing down on and

wishes to have further clarification on. If it is of assistance, I am more than happy for my officials to meet him to discuss matters further.

Mr Dallat: Given the awful legacy of illiteracy and innumeracy inherited from predecessors, what hope can the Minister give to parents who believe that their child has special needs when the Education Authority believes otherwise? How will those parents approach the tribunal and what support will they have?

Mr O'Dowd: First, I would encourage parents to talk to the teacher and, if need be, follow it up with the board of governors and/or the principal of the school. They should discuss the matter in detail to ensure that whatever support is required for the child is delivered, whether it is the responsibility of the school or, as we move forwards, the Education Authority. In all cases, there is an appeal mechanism in place that I will encourage parents to follow through to its conclusion.

I introduced a Bill today that will have its Second Reading next Tuesday. We are attempting to modernise special educational needs provision to deliver a more effective and efficient service to children, families and schools. The Bill will quite rightly attract significant attention; I have no doubt that the Education Committee will scrutinise it in great detail. I have already agreed to work with it on the matter. There are many matters that I bring before the Assembly over which I am prepared to dig my heels in and fight the good fight, but this is not one of them. I believe that, if the Assembly, the Committee and I work together, we can achieve a statementing process through the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill that meets the needs of our young people.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's commitment to cut the time from 26 to 20 weeks. He will be aware that I wrote to him recently about a constituent, and the broad context of that was whether he was now prepared to say that he will accept statements from other parts of the UK? Would that not help to streamline the process, rather than repeating it? Will he now give a commitment to accept statements from all constituent parts of the UK?

Mr O'Dowd: This is not an issue about the "constituent parts of the UK", as you put it. It has nothing to do with my views on the constitution of this society, the North or whatever you want to call it. As I set out in great detail in the written response, this is to do with the different emphases in the statementing process in England, Scotland or Wales. The

statementing process may be different in England, Scotland or Wales from the process here. There are variations in the processes as they would apply to a young person travelling from here to Britain. Those are just facts that we have to deal with, and I want to deal with them as quickly as possible. I want to remove obstacles to parents and children rather than place obstacles in their way. I can assure the Member that I will look for any way around this that does not interrupt the legislative process that we have to follow. Statementing and so on is all set down in legislation; it is not simply a matter for the Minister to dismiss. I assure the Member that I will not place any obstacles in the way of ensuring that young people receive the services they require, regardless of where they are from.

Mrs Overend: I might have missed the answer to the last question, although I have been listening to all the rest. I appreciate what the Minister said about cutting the wait from 26 weeks to 20 weeks, although I recognise that that has not always been met in the past. Will he guarantee that the upcoming Bill will end the current postcode lottery?

Mr O'Dowd: One of the initial reasons why the Bill was brought forward was an attempt to end the postcode lottery. There is a difference in the delivery of some of the services across the boards. Now that we have the Education Authority in place, that body will bring together best practice from across the boards. It will take some time to do that because it has a significant work programme in front of it. The shape of the legislation now rests with the Assembly. As sponsoring Minister, I have agreement from the Executive to bring forward a Bill. That Bill will be introduced and will go through the various stages of the Assembly. The shape of the final Bill will be as the Assembly dictates. I am prepared to work with the Assembly and the Committee and vice versa. We have had a very good working relationship on the matter to date, and I hope to continue that. I have no reason to suspect that that will not be the case. Let us produce an Act that meets the needs of our young people at the end of the journey.

School Transport: Integrated Sector

8. **Mr Wilson** asked the Minister of Education what percentage of children attending integrated schools receive free school transport. (AQO 7698/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The percentages of pupils attending integrated schools who are eligible for

assistance with home-to-school transport are 17.8% for primary and 51.9% for post-primary.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Wilson for a quick supplementary.

Mr Wilson: The discrepancy between the percentage of pupils who qualify for free school transport in the integrated sector and that for the controlled and maintained sector is a ratio of about 3:1, which partly explains the popularity of the integrated sector, especially at secondary level. That presents an unfair advantage for integrated schools over the maintained and controlled schools adjacent to them. It distorts the budget and the capital budget.

Mr Speaker: Is there a question coming?

Mr Wilson: What is the Minister doing and what consideration is he giving to ensure that there is a level playing field when it comes to that very important incentive for pupils to attend one sector as opposed to another?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that I recently received the transport review. It is a detailed document that has studied our transport system in great detail and has come forward with a significant number of recommendations. It is my intention, in the coming months, to publish that document for consultation. From that consultation, I will bring forward changes to our transport system that are felt to be required to ensure that we have a level playing field for everyone.

Education Authority: Update

9. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the establishment of the Education Authority. (AQO 7699/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. The Education Authority was formally established as a body corporate on 12 December 2014. The education and library boards and their staff commission will be dissolved on 1 April 2015, and their assets, liabilities, duties, functions and staff will transfer to the Education Authority. The Education Authority will become operational on that date.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for that response. Will he advise the House of when the new appointees to the board will be publicly announced?

Mr O'Dowd: A number of the appointees have recently been informed that their nomination has been accepted. The chair has recently been informed of their appointment, and formal letters etc have been exchanged. I am reluctant to announce names at this stage because I am not 100% sure of whether everyone has been formally informed and has formally accepted their nomination, but I assure the Member that it is well advanced and that there will be a board in place by 1 April.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill: Health Issues

T1. Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has had with the Health Minister about the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, which he referred to earlier, given the fact that health issues can often impinge upon special educational needs. (AQT 2191/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have had no discussions with the current Health Minister, but I had significant discussions with his predecessor, simply because of the timescale within which the Bill was drawn up and prepared for delivery to the Executive. My officials are in regular engagement with health officials under the current Health Minister in relation to this matter as they were under the previous Minister. I have no doubt that, as the Bill progresses and as matters arise, the Health Minister and I will have engagements around those points.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Too often in the past, parents and schools have said that there is a silo mentality in relation to health and education around these issues. Can the Minister assure the House that the Bill will contain provisions that will break down those silos?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I am satisfied that the Bill allows for a closer working relationship between my Department and the Health Department. Indeed, I believe that the silo mentality across the Executive has been broken down over the last number of years with a better working relationship among Ministers, although, sometimes, the public may not

believe that. There is a better working relationship, which has been sponsored by the Civil Service in regards to cross-departmental working. I believe that the Bill presents us with an opportunity to enhance and increase that, but I would also put on record the significant amount of cross-departmental work that already takes place.

Education Authority: Chair

T2. Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education why he is appointing someone with no education background as chair of the new Education Authority; someone who, on the day she leaves her existing post, will leave with a £250,000 golden handshake to walk into a public appointment that the Minister is gifting to her. (AQT 2192/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am satisfied that all the appointments that I have made to date, including that of the chair of the Education Authority, are the correct appointments, that they meet the criteria of the post and that the person involved will be more than capable of delivering quite a challenging role in the time ahead, ensuring that we end up with a body that is made up of different sectors operating as one sector for the betterment of our education system.

Mr Allister: Given the background of the other two shortlisted persons that the Minister considered, is he playing the green card in appointing Ms O'Connor?

Mr O'Dowd: I find that question totally unacceptable, and an accusation that I have acted in an inappropriate and illegal manner. I ask you, Mr Speaker, to investigate Mr Allister's comments because he has accused me not only of breaking the ministerial code but of acting illegally.

Mr Wilson: You would not be the first Sinn Féin Minister to do so.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me respond to your point of order. The question was presented as a question and not as an accusation, but I will study Hansard. My first impression is that, in fact, he did not make an accusation but asked a rhetorical question, perhaps provocatively so.

Schools: Capital Funding

T3. Mr Poots asked the Minister of Education when he will be in a position to announce the

next round of capital funding projects for new-build schools. (AQT 2193/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am not sure when that will be. First, I have to formally announce the outcome of the education budget for resource and capital, and I will appear before the Education Committee on Wednesday to do so. It depends how the capital programme rolls out this year, how much investment and spend we get out on the ground this year and how we believe that will impact moving into 2016-17. I want to be in a position to make a further announcement in this financial year, but I cannot confirm that at this stage.

Mr Poots: I trust that, when the Minister is looking at that opportunity, he will not ignore the chance to look at educational need in Dromore High School. The school was developed many years ago for around half of the population that it currently caters for, it performs particularly well in the local community and is very well regarded, and it does not have suitable recreational facilities for the needs of that school community.

Mr O'Dowd: I am acutely aware of the needs of Dromore High School. The Member and a number of his colleagues have raised the issue with me on numerous occasions. The Member will also be aware that I recently approved expenditure to purchase a site for a new build. I cannot pre-empt any announcement going into the future, but I certainly want to follow up on our initial investment in a site.

Austerity: Interdepartmental Working

T4. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Education whether he agrees that there is a need for his Department to work with the other Departments to fight austerity. (AQT 2194/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There is a need. Like many around the Executive table who have approached the recent Stormont House Agreement and the Budget, I think that we are doing our best to mitigate the worst aspects of austerity. We are doing it, however, in the context of a much-reduced resource and capital budget, but decisions that were made at the Executive are ensuring that the quality of life of many of our people and, indeed, young people in our schools is greatly improved rather than those decisions being made by someone else.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. What are his views on the current strike action in the teachers' unions?

Mr O'Dowd: Teachers' unions and other public-sector workers have decided to move forward towards ballots for strike action, which they are perfectly entitled to do. I do not think that any of the teachers' unions have announced the outworkings of those ballots yet. We will wait to see the decision of their membership. I assure the unions, their membership and the general public that I am doing everything within my power to obtain as much investment for education as possible. The Member will note that, as part of the final Budget settlement, the Executive agreed to an additional £64 million for education.

It is worth noting — I made the point recently at a teachers' trade union conference — that, between the draft Budget and the final Budget, the Executive increased investment in public services. If, as some wish, the Tories take over here directly and we have direct rule, any change between the draft Budget and the final Budget, and any funds that became available, would not be invested in public services. They would be sent directly back to the Treasury. As a result of my interventions and those of the Executive and others, we ensured that there is an additional £64 million in education. If others had their way, that £64 million would have gone straight back to the Treasury.

Schools: New-build Criteria

T5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to increase the transparency of the school-building process so that there is a greater understanding of the cumulative pressures for capital rebuild and a greater level of transparency as to how projects are prioritised, given his recent comment that he has a list of around 100 schools that he would like to be rebuilt. (AQT 2195/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be or should be aware that, after my announcement in 2013 or 2014, I published on my Department's website the criteria that are used for the selection of new builds. There is no onus on me to do that. The authority rests solely with the Minister as to which new builds go ahead, but I believe in transparency in government and in accountability, hence the reason why I published the criteria.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister acknowledge that it would be healthy if there was a wider understanding of the pressures that schools are

under, the poor condition of some of them and the need to rebuild so that, when deciding whether to build new departmental headquarters, thought is given to costs and options so that all Departments are prioritised appropriately?

Mr O'Dowd: In general, there is acceptance among the political class of the pressures on all our budgets, particularly capital and resource. The question is about where you place priorities in society and what you want the direction of travel to be. That is at the heart of the question. I have a capital budget that is 20% reduced on last year. I have to make decisions. I will be making announcements in the coming days, and I will be in the Education Committee for further scrutiny around those matters. I remain hopeful that, through in-year funding, I will be able to access further capital funds for various projects. We are at a stage in education where we have a significant number of projects that are, if not shovel ready, very close to being shovel ready and can react quite quickly to the availability of funds.

Education: Departmental Opportunities

T9. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Education what opportunities exist in the realignment of his Department in the years ahead. (AQT 2199/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Bringing children's services into the Department of Education is the right decision. It allows for a complete focus on the child and on children's needs, pressures and opportunities. It has been the right move. It is an opportunity for the Department to engage in the entire education and well-being of the child. As I have often said standing here, while we have many, many, many fine teachers, they cannot do this on their own. Unless we look at all aspects of a child's life, education is not going to work.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Could the Minister tell the Assembly what priorities he suggests the new board focuses on?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not wish to bring the wrath of the Education Authority down on me in the first number of weeks of it taking charge of the education remit, but there are quite significant budgetary challenges ahead. The focus for us all has to be on improving educational outcomes for all our young people and on

ensuring that, where opportunities exist, they are exploited to the full and that, where challenges exist, there are answers and ways found for our young people. The Education Authority presents a huge opportunity for our education system. Its membership is from a wide range of organisations. I suspect that they will naturally come in thinking initially about the needs of their own organisation but will quite quickly gel around a common cause. That common cause has to be the educational well-being of all our young people.

Programming and Coding: A-level Qualification

T10. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education how seriously he views the fact that only six post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are offering an A-level qualification in programming and coding — a qualification required by over 60% of companies in Northern Ireland that are looking for employees — and what he is doing to address this situation. (AQT 2200/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Member may be referring to a new A level that has been introduced into the system. I do not have the exact numbers of schools providing that A level. We are providing training and support to schools so that a greater number of them can take on that A level. It is very relevant to the STEM debate that the Assembly is holding.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is an essential qualification that post-primary schools should be taking up?

Mr O'Dowd: It is certainly an essential qualification if you are going to enter the field of computer science or computing. This goes back to one of the other questions that I was asked during Question Time. I hope that young people who are seeking to enter a career in computing and ICT are advised that this new A level is available and will significantly enhance their opportunities. It all comes back to good careers advice being given to young people so that they know which pathway they want to choose and what qualifications they require to follow that pathway.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

STEM in Schools

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the recent publication of the Education and Training Inspectorate's evaluation of the implementation of the World Around Us, the Confederation of British Industry's 'Step Change: A new approach for schools in Northern Ireland' report, Momentum's digital sector action plan and the Engineering UK 2015 report, all of which highlight the importance of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in schools; recognises the role of STEM as a key driver of the economy; and calls on the Minister of Education to support and encourage the full implementation of the STEM aspects of the curriculum in order to bring about high quality learning for all children. — [Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education).]

Mr McCausland: As a member of the Education Committee and a former science teacher, I support the motion. It is a very relevant motion. The subjects of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, or STEM as we describe them, are extremely important, and the motion refers to a number of recent reports and evaluations that emphasise the importance of children having access to and a good knowledge of those subjects.

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

The inspectorate has said that STEM subjects are important, the sector has said that they are important and the Committee and common sense would say that they are important as well. The motion calls on the Minister to support the schools and the system to:

"encourage the full implementation of the STEM aspects of the curriculum in order to bring about high quality learning for all children."

We know that the Minister will have a number of priorities and things that he wants to happen and be done during his tenure in office. I sincerely hope that that is one of them and that he will make the teaching of STEM subjects one of his priorities.

The motion also states that STEM subjects are a "key driver of the economy". They are a growth area for the economy. If that is the

case, and if we want to address issues of unemployment, particularly among younger people, surely we do not want to put ourselves in a situation where we have to bring into Northern Ireland young people with the requisite skills in those areas to fill the opportunities that there are in a range of businesses in the STEM areas. We should be in a position where young people here are available with the skills to take up the jobs that are being created and to help to create more jobs in what is clearly a key driver for the economy and a growth area.

STEM subjects tend to be focused on at secondary level. However, as the motion implies, they also have a relevance in primary schools. The Royal Society of Chemistry, along with other scientific organisations, have stressed the importance of that subject in primary as well as secondary schools. The Committee sincerely hopes that the Minister will throw his full weight, his full support and his full resources behind STEM subjects to ensure that they are taught at primary and secondary level and that all aspects of the reports and the evaluations by the inspectorate are taken into account in so doing.

It was touched on, maybe a little bit humorously, earlier that there is an opportunity to say to young people in Northern Ireland that there are good examples that can be an encouragement and perhaps even an inspiration to them. The IT link across the Atlantic with America is referred to as Project Kelvin. One of the great things about Lord Kelvin was that, not only was he a theoretical scientist, he was a very practical scientist who created many different inventions and so on. We should also keep it in mind that there is a value in making children in schools more aware of the scientific, technical, engineering and mathematical heritage of Ulster, which has produced so many significant figures in those areas.

It would be remiss of me to simply leave it with Lord Kelvin. We might also refer to Sir Samuel Davidson and the Sirocco Works. He was a pre-eminent engineer with so many different and diverse inventions to his name. He was also the proprietor of a major engineering works that not only produced goods in Belfast but exported them around the world. Belfast was very much a centre of engineering and of invention and innovation. We might also think of Harry Ferguson, the engineer who made such a significant contribution in the agricultural field. For the benefit of Mr Hazzard, who is no longer with us, the common theme across Sir Samuel Davidson, Harry Ferguson and Lord

Kelvin is not simply their engineering expertise but the fact that they were staunch unionists and very much in support of Ulster and the union —

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

Mr McCausland: I am sure that Mr Hazzard will want to take that to heart.

I support the motion and hope that the Minister will take it to heart.

Mr Newton: I, too, support the motion. Like my colleague, I want to hone in on what I see as a key phrase in the motion:

"STEM as a key driver of the economy".

I want to make two points on that. Our history on STEM, and indeed Northern Ireland's successful high achievers who have come out of what we now call "STEM" — certainly, it was not called "STEM" in their day — is a platform on which we can build to take us forward. In the STEM areas, Northern Ireland has punched well above its weight; much like our sporting achievements over the weekend. It is often said that the only resources that we have in Northern Ireland are our people. STEM gives us an opportunity to embrace all those elements on which to build a strategy for success.

I want to mention, as others have, a few people who have been successful and their backgrounds. Harry Ferguson, who has been mentioned, was a farmer's son from County Down; he started life in a very humble way, working in a bicycle and car repair business. He was fascinated by aviation and inspired by the Wright brothers. Indeed, he wanted to embrace, and he did, his scientific and technical knowledge and convert it into success in running a business. It is difficult to think what the agriculture industry might be like today had it not been for the benefits of his skills and engineering knowledge.

Another was John Stewart Bell. He was born in Belfast in a very humble background; he decided on a career in science when he was 11 years of age. He did not have the opportunity to go to a grammar school, but he finished his education at Belfast technical college. He became a technician at Queen's University and was inspired there. He graduated with two degrees in experimental physics and mathematical physics. This was a man from Belfast who corrected Einstein. Only recently

he had a street named after him in Belfast. Unfortunately, he missed out on a Nobel prize only because of his untimely death.

Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell was born in Belfast and educated in Lurgan. She failed her 11-plus. She was educated in York and impressed her physics teacher so much that he encouraged her down the line of science. She graduated from Glasgow University with a Bachelor of Science degree. She campaigned to increase the number of females who participate in physics and astronomy. She is house patron of Burnell House at Cambridge House Grammar School in Ballymena.

There are many, many more who could be named. Others in the Chamber mentioned them. Lord Kelvin — or 1st Baron Kelvin, as he was referred to — was mentioned because of the recent Kelvin infrastructure for communications.

Let me just say this in the short time that I have left: the benefits of STEM will be realised fully only when there is an increased understanding between science, technology and mathematics and a full understanding of the potential of those subjects to our community and society. We need pathways for young skilled and knowledgeable people; we need a change of culture to reduce and manage risk aversion; we need a change of culture to build the links between Northern Ireland businesses, universities and publicly funded research projects.

I hope, on the basis of what the First Minister said earlier today, that the silo mentality can be got over —

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

Mr Newton: — and that the Departments can work together to maximise the potential of STEM to our economy.

Mr McGlone: Mo bhuíochas leat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Agus mo bhuíochas leis an Choiste as ucht an t-ábhar seo a thabhairt os ár gcomhair inniu. I welcome the motion, and I thank the Education Committee in particular for bringing it to the Assembly for debate. All of us will, I hope, agree that science, technology, engineering and mathematics — STEM — play a key role in driving the economy, and we can agree on the importance of STEM subjects in our schools.

There are consistent themes in the reports referred to in the motion. I will begin with the Education and Training Inspectorate's evaluation of the implementation of the World Around Us in primary schools. From December 2013 to June 2014, the inspectorate visited primary schools across all education and library boards and management types and sizes. In addition, it held discussions with stakeholders, and a web survey was completed by school principals in consultation with their staff. The inspectorate found that, although primary schools are at different points in their implementation of World Around Us, two thirds of schools have prioritised its development in the past three years. However, overall, schools remain more confident about the quality of their provision in history and geography and in thinking skills and personal capabilities. Almost half believe that they do not include the progression of the relevant practical, experiential skills in science and technology in their planning. Those schools cite various reasons for that, including competing priorities such as literacy, numeracy and assessment and a lack of access to training.

Significantly, only 37% of the 107 schools that responded to the web survey reported that they had staff who had completed STEM training with recognised providers. The inspectorate made recommendations in its report, three of which were specifically for the Department of Education. Those recommendations are to encourage and support the full implementation of the science and technology strand of WAU in the primary school to bring about high-quality learning for all children; to investigate how primary schools can be supported in the delivery of WAU through a variety of means, including expertise from the post-primary sector and from a range of external stakeholders, such as the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS); and to re-emphasise the importance of WAU, particularly the significance of science and technology in policy and planning for initial teacher education. It should not be difficult or incur any significant cost for the Minister to endorse those recommendations to improve the provision of STEM subjects in our primary schools.

A report from the Momentum digital summit rightly applauds what has been done so far but emphasises the need to build on those achievements. Among the proposals to emerge from the summit is the need for:

"Major changes to the current education system in its support for the sector and the core technical skills required by employers on short, medium and long-term basis."

Key to the changes it proposes is the identification of education as being at the heart of the drive for sustainable success. Momentum recognises the serious issues faced in the upskilling of teachers so that they are able to teach coding or "computer programming", as it is more widely known, with confidence. It also acknowledges that the way in which the education system works allows, in theory, for flexibility in the provision of teaching of coding.

The revised curriculum includes ICT as a cross-curricular skill, and the flexibility already in place in the revised curriculum allows schools to teach computer science in any Key Stage. However, Momentum points out that that rarely happens, other than in an ad hoc way, for a number of reasons. Schools need to seek access to the knowledge required in teaching coding, and the demand for the subject needs to be fostered, especially in primary school and at pre-GCSE level. It argues strongly for the introduction of teaching coding to children from primary school age at Key Stage 2. It is essential to deliver coding to the widest cross-section of pupils at the earliest opportunity. Momentum used the example of Estonia, where, with a similar-sized population, the Government have pledged to introduce coding early in primary schools. I support that call. Children in the North should have access to coding from the age of eight. As Momentum stated, that would:

"build upon the current on-going initiatives for the rollout of GCSE and 'A' Level computing courses to post primary schools."

The CBI's 'Step Change' report argued that education is about:

"preparing young people for success"

in work and in life.

3.45 pm

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

Mr McGlone: As part of the proposed systemic review of the education system, it recommended more action on implementing the Government's Success through STEM strategy. It also recommended that computing be taught as a core subject for children in Northern Ireland, that all schools should be required to offer separate sciences —

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

Mr McGlone: — as an option for young people at GCSE level and that where schools are too small, they should offer effectively —

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

Mr McGlone: — a full range of subjects. They should continue to be encouraged to —

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

Mr B McCrea: I worry a bit about this debate. I realise that we are not speaking to a packed House, but I heard Mr Lunn, Mr Hazzard and a few other people say, "Do you know what? Things are not so bad. They are going OK". Actually, I am not so sure that they are. Of course, we can talk about the ETI report that has come out, which says that of our primary schools, just over half — 54% — felt capable of teaching the science strand, but it goes further than that. I do not know whether Members were listening to the radio on Sunday, but, on 'Inside Business', Des Speed of PathXL stated that the shortage of software skills had become something of a crisis and that we need joined-up government to sort that shortage out. Peter Fitzgerald of Randox said that they are desperate for more scientists and engineers.

I know that Members here have talked about the great Northern Ireland Science Festival. It was very successful, with 10,000 predicted to go but 30,000 actually turning up at the 11-day event, which had over 100 events. However, I wonder how many of the Members here present went to any of those. How many of you went to hear about John Stewart Bell? A few accolades were given here, but I am sure that my Ulster Unionist colleagues would be delighted to know that he was a cousin of Billy Bell, a former MLA from my constituency, and that his entire family was there. I am sure that that is something that they would like to make something of.

I was also surprised not to see many Members — none, apart from the Minister — at the Turing lecture. Over 700 people turned out, which was a record. It was fantastic. By 2020, which is only five years away, 20 billion devices will be connected to the Internet. Loads of other things were talked about. How many people went to see the Bodyworks exhibition, which was brought by SmithKline Beecham of Glasgow? How many people went to see the laser demonstration for the International Year of Light

when it was at the museum? Basically, there is a lot of talk but not much action. How many people have been to CERN, built by a Northern Ireland man, to see what it is about? How many people have been to the Science Museum in London? How many people have listened to NASA? How many people know that 1.46 million people in the UK are employed in IT and that 1.2 billion tech jobs have not been filled worldwide? Those issues show why we must get more people involved.

I got a very nice email from Roisin Crawford, whom Members from the north-west will know as the person who runs STEM Aware. She mentioned the Northern Ireland primary school curriculum, saying that little science is required with even less practised. She also says that some older teachers practise, but others never did science. I think that the Minister has to take it on board that science has been hit by the fact that the unofficial 11-plus tests do not deal with science. If it is not measured, it does not get taught, so there is a problem coming through in the next three or four years.

It is interesting that Roisin, being a female engineer, also said that she did not think that we should have a go at girls specifically as part of the gender balance but we should point it out to them that they have an unfair advantage in the jobs market. People are desperate to get women into science, IT and all those areas.

There is an issue with Sentinus that I want to deal with. I hope that the Minister will tell us that a bit more funding on that is coming through. It is an excellent exercise. I also wonder how many Members went down to the BT Young Scientists and Technology Exhibition. I listened to Jennifer McKinley, who is a senior lecturer in the school of geography, archaeology and palaeoecology. What has that got to do with anything? She is a world expert in forensic science, that is what. We have got to push our really good people. I have to say to Members that it is all very well trotting out the fine words, having the speech and doing all those things, but I wish that a few more of you could find your way to joining the excellent APG on science and technology, getting involved in the science debate and going along to all these great things. Science is the future, but actions speak louder than words.

Mr McCallister: I just have a few remarks about this. I take some of the points from earlier in the debate about coding. Mr McGlone made points around how we get kids and young people interested in that earlier. I will be interested in the Minister's response. Now we are doing an A level on IT and computing, but

have we the expertise to deliver that across the board? My experience in my constituency is that we do not. Are there other options for lifting the skills of our teachers and the staff who are needed to deliver this? Are there models online that we should look to be able to do that and to extend those choices?

I too hear much talk about STEM. For the entire almost eight years that I have been a Member of the House, probably not a year has gone by when we have not debated this subject or something very close to it. That is something, yet when you come to look at what action we have taken or whether we have improved Northern Ireland's game particularly in this area, I am not so sure that we have. We are still training too many people for law and teaching. We have an entire debate around teacher training places, and some people are happy that we have saved St Mary's and Stranmillis, but at what cost? Is there a cost in the number of university places? Is there a cost in the number of further education places? Is there a cost in the number of experts we could have brought in to look at IT and STEM subjects? All those things we could have done, could have looked at and could have changed, but we have not made the bold decisions that somehow are needed to address this.

That is why I sometimes get slightly frustrated when I read very well intentioned motions from the Committee. It is an important subject for the Committee to acknowledge and to look at, but we are at the point where we need to actually take action and see whether the Minister can now tell us that we have dramatically improved our STEM subjects in the last eight years. Are we getting more of our students interested? Are we putting more people through? Are we creating the economic conditions for that to flourish and develop at the other end, or are we exporting most of them to other parts of the UK or indeed other parts of the world? That is something of which we have to make sure, and I want to hear from the Minister whether we are achieving any of that, rather than just the well-intentioned words.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):

Gabhaim buíochas leis an Choiste as an rún seo a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil. Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis tacaíocht a chur in iúl don mhéadú i líon na ndaltaí atá ag tabhairt faoi ábhair STEM. I want to thank the Committee for tabling the motion, and I welcome the opportunity to express my support for the increased take-up of STEM subjects in our schools — I did say "increased".

Reading through the motion, I thought to myself, "This is actually a very good motion, and it will be a worthwhile debate in the Chamber". It was my view that, unfortunately, there would be no media interest in it, because there would be no controversial aspect or rivalry across the Floor of the Assembly. In fairness, however, some Members actually managed to bring in which party or which tradition certain scientists belonged to. That may actually attract some media interest to the core subject, which will actually help us all in our task of ensuring that there is a good and informed debate about the STEM subjects. In a strange way, a wee bit of community rivalry may actually assist us in raising the profile of the subject. I emphasise again that I fully support the motion and do not require my arm to be bent up my back on the matter. In my response, I will outline how my Department has worked on the issue in the past.

I absolutely recognise the importance to our economy and society of having young people familiar with and qualified in STEM subjects, and my Department continues to prioritise the delivery of the STEM strategy. It is crucial that our education system continues to work, above all, in the interests of our young people. That includes enabling them to take their place in the world of work as employees and, indeed, as employers. I also welcome the opportunity to highlight the importance of giving heed to the voices of industry in the education debate, voices such as the CBI, Momentum and Engineering UK. I have spent considerable time engaging with representative bodies such as the CBI and Momentum, and I have also engaged with a significant number of employers about what they require from our education system for young people moving forward, including in the STEM subjects. I have found it enlightening and informative, even in terms of that debate, and the representative bodies and employers now understand better the role of the Department and the work that it is involved in. That conversation continues, as it should. They also seek to support and encourage students not only in the subjects that they choose but in the development of the skills that they will need to thrive in the workplace.

Engagement with STEM begins in primary school, as many Members pointed out. The recent ETI report on the implementation of the World Around Us area of learning at primary level highlighted the good practice that is evident in the majority of our primary schools. The report highlighted that whole-school planning and implementation of the World Around Us is key to children developing the skills and concepts associated with the World

Around Us over their time in school. Some very good practice was highlighted. I was particularly impressed with Lough View Integrated Primary School, which uses the school grounds, including a polytunnel and pond, in an imaginative way to support the delivery of the World Around Us to engage the pupils with environmental science.

Children benefit from the flexibility of our curriculum, as it allows teachers and schools to express their own interests and expertise in teaching. I noted the comments of the Chair of the Education Committee, who pointed out that many of the organisations that present to the Committee on a specialised field wish that specialised field to form a statutory part of the curriculum. It is about getting the balance right, whether that is computer coding or other elements of the STEM agenda. If we emphasise one element, are we in danger of losing out to another element? I am on record as saying that I think that the curriculum will need to be reviewed by the latter part of 2016, when I am not in post. It is an apt time for a review, given how long the curriculum has been in place. A lot of those questions can be posed and answered as to what elements of the curriculum, if any, should be statutory, including STEM subjects.

We need to encourage our primary-school teachers to deliver this area of learning. A great science teacher is a great teacher, not necessarily a great scientist, and we are fortunate to have many great teachers. The report has recommendations for my Department as well as for schools and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment. I have agreed in principle to the recommendations for my Department and have asked my officials to consider what actions might help to deliver on the recommendations. That report is being actioned.

The flexibility in the curriculum is also valued by our pupils, who have the freedom to follow their own interests in choosing the qualifications that they wish to pursue at GCSE and A level. Under the entitlement framework, all young people, regardless of where they live or which school they attend, are guaranteed access to a minimum number and range of courses at Key Stage 4 and post 16.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the Minister giving way. That issue has been prevalent in recent days, so is he confident that the entitlement framework and buy-in from schools will continue, given the budgetary constraints that we face? A number of schools in my constituency said that it will be difficult for them

to meet the financial requirements. They bought into the concept of the entitlement framework, but they are not sure that they can afford it.

Mr O'Dowd: It is no longer a case of whether schools wish to buy into it; it is compulsory. I understand that there are financial pressures on schools, but this has been in the planning since 2006. In fact, funding was supposed to have stopped a number of years ago. I have continued the funding; I reduced it over those years to allow schools to prepare for the reduction. I suspect that, over the next number of years, that funding will continue to reduce. Schools have to prepare for that. Also, as planning authorities, we have to prepare for it by ensuring that we have a network of sustainable schools in place that are capable of delivering the curriculum that our young people require and that is so vital, given the wide range of subjects in the STEM field. We need an entitlement framework with such a wide range of subjects available to pupils. It is certainly a challenge for schools, planners — in area planning — and future Ministers.

4.00 pm

In making decisions about courses and qualifications, young people must be supported by appropriate information and advice on careers. My Department has been supportive of efforts to increase teachers' knowledge of the range of careers that a qualification in a STEM subject can lead to. I am also aware that teachers are not the only advisers to our young people. A vital role is played by parents. Mrs Overend said that she is engaging with her young children about options that they will now have which will dictate career paths in future. That is one of the issues that was raised during the review of careers advice. Parents need to have access to information that enables them to provide it to their young people so that they can choose the correct career options.

In addition to the vital role played by parents, the business sector has a key role to play in encouraging and informing students of the value of pursuing qualifications in STEM subjects. I have encouraged the business sector and businesses that I have met to become engaged with their local schools and knock on the door of their local primary school and post-primary school to introduce themselves and make those connections, which are vital to education and business. That would bring industry, sciences and engineering out of the workshops and labs and into the schools and say, "If you want to follow this career, you

need to follow these subjects". That is vital, and there is clear evidence that connections between our businesses and our schools are improving. I believe that increased involvement —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just let me finish this point, and I will. I believe that the increased involvement of businesses in schools by providing, for example, work experience is key to ensuring that the students who leave our schools are skilled in the areas that will lead to employment.

Mr B McCrea: I wish to support the statement that the Minister has just made and draw to his attention the opinion of Dr Martin Brown, who runs Science and Technology Experts in Primary Schools (STEPS). We need to find some way of getting modest funding to encourage industry to go into primary schools. I know that, in these financial times, things are difficult, but we need to encourage people to go and work in primary schools.

Mr O'Dowd: I accept that money makes the world go round, but resources are limited at this stage. I have been lobbied strongly by the Assembly, schools, parents and pupils to ring-fence as much money as possible for schools. Thus far, we have achieved a significant further investment in schools. I will make the final announcement on my budget in the next number of days. I assure the Member that, if I had moneys to do other projects, I would do them, but we do not have the money at this stage.

I move to the involvement of girls in STEM subjects. We are unusual here in that there is no great difference between boys' and girls' attainment in the STEM subjects overall, but there are differences between specific subjects. In particular, I am aware that many girls can envisage a career in medical science in a way that they cannot envisage one in engineering. I note Mr McCrea's comments and the contact that he has had. There is no better example than personal experience. When a young woman who is engaged in engineering speaks to other young women about the subject, it certainly opens up new pathways for our young women. It was refreshing to note the examples of female scientists that were referred to during the debate. I also noted the comments of Mr Hazzard about 'The Guardian' article. We can be careless about these things at times, which can have a detrimental impact. Sometimes, I hear comments from my daughter about what careers are available to girls, and I certainly

hope that she does not get the perception from me that a line has been drawn somewhere so that women cannot enter this or that field. Certainly, we have to be very careful that we do not present barriers to anyone entering their chosen career.

As I said, there are differences between specific subjects. In particular, I am aware of that many girls can envisage a career in medical science in a way that they cannot envisage one in engineering. The causes of this are large and cannot be addressed by schools alone. We need business to work to ensure that all students are aware of careers in engineering and fight against traditional stereotyping. Careers in engineering are not jobs for the boys, as they are often perceived, but jobs for everyone.

In supporting the involvement of business in informing our students of the opportunities available to them, I am aware that Momentum in particular has been lobbying for computer coding to be made compulsory at primary school. I have already commented on that. The curriculum as it stands provides for all primary pupils to engage in age-appropriate coding. I am aware that some schools provide computer coding to their pupils as an after-school club. Some provide this through the Sentinus IT's Your Choice programme, which is funded by my Department. In response to the Chair of the Education Committee's comment about the Sentinus budget, the final decisions on budgets have not been made yet. Under the draft budget, there was a proposal to remove £100,000 from the Sentinus budget line. That is from a £400,000 budget line, so is quite a significant cut. When I am trying to direct funding into schools, I have to look at all areas of my budget, and I will give confirmation regarding all these matters at a later date.

As the ETI report on the implementation of the World Around Us has made clear, teachers value the flexibility in the curriculum and children engage in and enjoy learning about subjects that their teachers are passionate and knowledgeable about. I am keen that the flexibility in the curriculum should be maintained, and, as I have said, future Ministers may wish to review the curriculum to decide which, if any, parts of it should be compulsory at that time. However, my Department will continue to support initiatives that encourage teachers and students to engage with coding at primary level, and I personally encourage schools to take up the challenge. Let us get our children a step ahead in this vital skill set. I am also keen to see organisations such as Momentum link with other relevant

organisations and apply for funding streams such as Horizon 2020 or Erasmus+ to further develop educational resources and initiatives to promote computer coding.

As well as encouraging industry to play a role, my Department funds interventions to promote STEM. As I have mentioned, Sentinus, the Department's front-line STEM delivery partner, delivers programmes to more than 57,000 primary and post-primary schoolchildren every year. We also have our STEM truck, which has proved very popular with schools and at any events that it moves along to.

Teacher training has been raised. Clearly, teachers have a key role to play in ensuring that young people have the skills and knowledge to join the workforce, but they need to be properly equipped to do the job. Initial teacher education is designed to meet the needs of our curriculum, and there needs to be adequate provision of suitably qualified teachers in STEM specialities. To this end, my Department has been encouraging higher education institutions to increase the number of students undertaking STEM subjects. I will continue to ensure that the providers maintain their drive to recruit students specialising in those subjects. One Member pointed out that students who have specialised in STEM at post-primary school or, indeed, at university are being snapped up by industry and are then lost to the teaching profession. Teaching simply cannot compete with the wages that are being provided in industry. Our success in encouraging students to take up STEM does not necessarily reflect recruitment into teaching, but we will continue to work at that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Minister draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the debate. There are many, many initiatives taking place. I think that we are improving, but I accept that there is still more to do.

Mr Kinahan: I welcome today's debate, and, on behalf of the Committee, I thank all the Members who spoke and the Minister for contributing to what proved to be an interesting and, I think, kindly debate. I also thank the many lobby groups that have contacted the Committee and informed our scrutiny, including Sentinus, Momentum, W5, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the Association for Science Education, BT and the Northern Ireland Science Park, with which the Committee organised the STEM is Cool event in January 2014. I hope

that they will all go on keeping the pressure on us.

The Chairperson mentioned the crucial importance of STEM to our economy, the good work already under way in our schools and the need for a full implementation of the STEM aspects of the curriculum to bring about high-quality learning for all our children. There appear to be a number of key elements to that. The first is initial teacher education. Clearly, the promotion of science and technology, including, perhaps, some change to the student teacher curriculum, will enhance primary teacher confidence in the delivery of science.

The second important element is continuing professional development (CPD) in STEM for teachers. I think that the Committee will agree with the Department that the best way to promote the uptake of STEM subjects — any subjects — in schools is through good teaching. The best way to promote good teaching is by good initial teacher education and CPD.

Another key element of promoting STEM in schools is good planned opportunities for problem solving, investigation and inquiry-based learning. Even if pupils do not go on to study science, that kind of learning, which promotes what is called scientific method — gathering evidence and analysing results — is a good grounding for children in many areas of study.

The Committee also recognises the value of teacher innovation. It is that element of the study of STEM in schools that has led to more pupils studying computer coding and taking up the associated A level. The Committee, therefore, supports ETI's call for more guidance materials from CCEA and greater facilitation by the Department of support by external STEM stakeholders for schools.

I would like to make one or two comments of my own. My colleague Mrs Overend said that the STEM programme was not ambitious enough; I think that that is probably one of the greatest understatements. We have rightly highlighted the gap between skills and industry and business and the jobs needed. Current estimates suggest that, by 2020, about 1.3 million scientists, engineers and technicians will be needed in the UK. We are also told that 80% of future jobs will include IT or technology. In a speech that I gave a few years back, I remember quoting the fact that China produces 75,000 engineers every year. It is probably more by now. The point is that we are not doing as well as we all seem to be putting across today, and I feel that we should re-look

at how we are doing and put much more effort into it.

When we look at what we provide and all the summaries from the inspection and from Sentinus, we get vague figures. We do not seem to really grasp the subject to make sure that STEM is available to all our children at every level. We need a completely new approach. We need to look at a zero tolerance on literacy and numeracy being carried on to every child having the chance to do STEM at every level. It is then up to them whether they choose to go into science or into something else. We should not tolerate anything less. That is the drive that we should be putting on the back of today's debate and not sitting thinking that we are doing particularly well.

I know that the Minister is struggling with a budget, but I hope that he can find some way of keeping the £100,000 for Sentinus. I am disturbed by the answer that he gave me last week. When asked about the use of the change fund for science, he told me that he had been turned down by DFP and that there was no more money for Sentinus. At the same time, there is a huge lack of morale in the education system. We need to find a way of lifting the whole education system, so I go back to my point that we need a complete review of how we do everything. The budget cuts that are coming through emphasise the point that we should rethink how we do everything, dropping the sacred cows and trying to find a way forward. We need to see STEM much more in all parts of our education system; we need to see all teachers with some grounding in it; we need to see it at every level; we need to see it at further education; and we need to carry it through in society.

I understand the balance that the Minister mentioned. If you go for one subject being compulsory, you lose on others, but the world is changing so fast and furious that you have to take more of a risk and lean towards it. If we have a different Minister in the future and another review, we will all have to make the same points again, but it is important that we look at leaning more towards STEM subjects.

I will move on to one or two comments from those who have spoken. Seán Rogers said that we must encourage inquisitiveness and problem solving. That is the same as Lord Ballyedmond said to me once when he discovered that I was in politics: we must have students who can think outside the box and solve problems for themselves.

Mr Rogers also said that we need to do much more practical work, and there were many other very good points in his contribution. He said that technology is a great leveller but that we should be spreading it out so that everyone can do it. It certainly failed with me at school.

4.15 pm

Sandra Overend said that we need to focus on careers, that it is a no-brainer and that business demands more STEM, hence the comments that I made in my speech.

Chris Hazzard said that it is not all bad. I accept that there are many very good things going on, but we must not just sit back on our laurels. He said that there are great examples and that we are not in crisis, yet Basil McCrea pointed out in his speech that we are in crisis. We need to look much closer at what we are doing. We need to look at enquiring into what is going on and to look for the inspiration. Terrific names have been mentioned today, such as Hans Sloane, Francis Hutcheson and William Thomson. There is a whole mass there. However, there are many whom we just do not see, and they are the people of the future. When you watch the Generation Innovation video and see all the great technologies that we have in Northern Ireland, you realise that things are bright, but, as I said, we must not rest on our laurels.

Trevor Lunn made many more points. He said that there is a lack of confidence in primary schools, especially in science, and that there is a great deal of work to be done.

Nelson McCausland said that we should make teaching STEM one of our top priorities, and he, too, showed us the great Ulster-Scots links to so many of the mathematicians, scientists and those with technical brilliance from Northern Ireland.

Robin Newton talked about the framework and mentioned Harry Ferguson and the Wright brothers. I worked at Shorts a few years ago. The first vertical take-off aircraft was developed there. We have a terrific history, and we should be working on that.

Patsy McGlone highlighted the statistics and the issues raised by the ETI and the World Around Us. He said that we could do more with WAU and that we are doing things. I think that the main point raised today is that we must not rest on our laurels, and Basil McCrea said that we must do much more. I think he said that there are 1.2 billion people in the IT world in the whole world. We need to see Northern Ireland

becoming a leading technological industry in the future. That is what we all should be aiming for. We must not rest on our laurels. Other good points were made, but we could get buried in them all.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the recent publication of the Education and Training Inspectorate's evaluation of the implementation of the World Around Us, the Confederation of British Industry's 'Step Change: A new approach for schools in Northern Ireland' report, Momentum's digital sector action plan and the Engineering UK 2015 report, all of which highlight the importance of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) in schools; recognises the role of STEM as a key driver of the economy; and calls on the Minister of Education to support and encourage the full implementation of the STEM aspects of the curriculum in order to bring about high quality learning for all children.

Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework

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

Mr Irwin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the effective impact the tackling rural poverty and social inclusion (TRPSI) framework has had on the farming and rural community; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to implement the recommendations outlined in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development position paper on the review of the TRPSI framework.

The tackling rural poverty and social inclusion framework — TRPSI as it is known — is designed to address rural poverty and disadvantage via a range of measures in partnership with a number of voluntary and community groups and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. TRPSI focuses on three priority areas for intervention:

access poverty; financial poverty; and social isolation. Its aim is to cover target areas such as the elderly, lone parents, the disabled, the unemployed and children.

The framework is delivered by DARD in partnership with other Departments and includes a wide range of programmes, each with its own objectives and targets, with an overall evaluation anticipated some time this year. It is also one of the Department's targets in the Programme for Government and the rural White Paper action plan.

Members will be aware that those who live in rural areas are often at a disadvantage when it comes to service provision and employment prospects. They are often isolated and are living in poverty. Things that the urban dweller takes for granted, such as broadband, regular transport, access to essential services and job opportunities, are often missing in rural areas. This can have a long-term detrimental effect on rural dwellers, their families, their health and life in general. We are all too familiar with stories of the hardship and loneliness faced by the person living on their own or the desperation felt by our young people with no job prospects.

With this in mind, the Committee agreed to review the current TRPSI programme to find out how effective it has been and whether it could be improved in order to maximise opportunities. The Committee took evidence from a wide range of community and voluntary groups, the Department, the Public Health Agency and statistics' experts. It also commissioned a number of research papers on issues affecting rural poverty and isolation.

Due to the number of interested voluntary and community groups, the Committee was anxious that it captured as much evidence as it could to inform the review. It decided, therefore, to organise a stakeholder event, which was held in a central rural location to facilitate those groups. It was very clear to the Committee, even before the review commenced, that the issues faced by our rural communities today are genuine, cause great concern and need to be given the importance they deserve. The stakeholder event was a well-attended and worthwhile experience. It showed us the passion and commitment of rural dwellers, community groups and voluntary workers and the endless hours of effort they commit to in order to improve the lives of rural dwellers.

What was apparent from all the oral evidence sessions and the stakeholder event was that there was overwhelming agreement that the current TRPSI programme has had a

substantial impact on the lives of rural dwellers. It was felt that the programmes TRPSI offers, such as the assisted rural travel scheme, farm families health checks programme and fuel poverty initiatives, to name but a few, have made a real difference to people in the rural community.

The groups and individuals that the Committee met demonstrated far-reaching local knowledge of the issues and concerns in their communities. This is one of the factors that has made the TRPSI programme a success. Local people working in partnership at a grass-roots level know what is happening in their own area. They have years of expertise and knowledge, which they are able to maximise to reach out to those most in need.

The voluntary and community groups are all known to one another and have good working relationships. They are able to signpost the services available, with numerous positive outcomes to date. This has been a key factor in the success of the TRPSI programme.

One of our key recommendations, therefore, is that the Department build on the successes of the current programme to include the knowledge of grass-roots organisations. They know the real issues the rural community faces and have the drive and ambition to deliver solutions. This aspect cannot afford to be overlooked by the Department, and, if used in a meaningful way, will inform and shape any future programme.

Particular mention should be made of the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) programme, delivered in conjunction with the Public Health Agency. MARA aims to improve the health and well-being of people living in rural areas, where the hidden nature of poverty and isolation can make it difficult to connect with the most vulnerable. The Committee heard that MARA has visited up to 14,000 households to share information on services, grants and benefits that the rural dweller may be entitled to. This has in turn released previously unclaimed money, which has not only been of value to the individual, but has benefited the wider economy of Northern Ireland. The success of MARA can be very clearly linked to the ability to tap into local knowledge and expertise quickly and effectively, thereby targeting those rural dwellers most in need.

Given that MARA has now collected a considerable amount of data, it is the opinion of the Committee that this data can provide a valuable insight into the issues of poverty and

deprivation that the rural community faces. This is why we are recommending that the Department fully utilises the data captured, along with the evaluation of the project when available, to inform a successor programme.

Another notable issue that emerged during the review was about how rural deprivation is currently measured. Again, that is where the rural dweller is at a disadvantage. Unlike an urban area, where people are socially separated, rural areas quite often have an affluent person living alongside someone deprived and experiencing real poverty. That method of measurement has to change in order to accurately assess the real rural picture to better inform the decisions of the policymakers. As a Committee, we have called on the Department to work alongside the Department of Finance and Personnel to commission NISRA to undertake a review of how to measure rural deprivation. The Committee firmly believes, as do the community groups that appeared before us, that, if that review is carried out, it will make a real difference to the identification of rural deprivation and will, in turn, produce a positive outcome for the rural dweller.

Over the course of the review, the Committee heard from witnesses that there appears to be a lack of basic awareness of the use of the Northern Ireland multiple deprivation indices. Despite guidance being available from NISRA, it would seem that little or no attention is paid to that aspect of measuring deprivation. The guidance is vital to any policy that aims to target rural areas. The Committee, therefore, recommends that DARD actively engages with DFP to ensure that NISRA is commissioned to undertake a review of the NI multiple deprivation indices to establish how Departments use the indices and what importance they place on the guidance for rural areas.

Another issue that gave concern to the Committee was the responsibility for rural issues and rural proofing. During the evidence sessions, the Committee heard that there was a general perception that rural issues are the remit of DARD. Whilst it may seem appropriate for DARD to take the lead on rural issues, it was felt that it is not the only Department with responsibility for that area. Stakeholders agreed that Departments were not working with the rural White Paper and that their policies were not rural-proofed. The Committee has, therefore, recommended that DARD commences an evaluation of the level of consideration that other Departments give to rural issues in respect of policy, services and

resources, and it is calling for the development of an interdepartmental working group to monitor that. We look forward to hearing the outcome of that recommendation.

Another concern for the Committee that emerged during the review was the intention of the Department to move £1.7 million from resource to capital and the requirement for it to be spent within one year. Whilst the Department has justified that budget move by stating that it will provide more sustainable development, the Committee is of the opinion that capital is generally more difficult to spend and is not necessarily where the need is. That is why we have recommended that the Minister rethinks that budget allocation. As a Committee, we remain to be convinced that that allocation of capital funding is the best option for the TRPSI programme.

Finally, there has been a great deal of apprehension around the creation of the new super-councils. Several stakeholders told the Committee that they fear that the new councils will not have a rural focus or make rural issues a priority. There has been considerable interest in the community planning process, and there is an expectation that rural areas will not be overlooked, but concern exists around budgets and funding for community groups. Again, the people on the ground are best placed to advise where and how any funding is best placed. The Committee is recommending that the Department proactively engages with the new councils to ensure that rural issues are a priority and that they are taken into account —

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

Mr Irwin: — when it comes to policy development in rural and farming communities.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to be identified with the comments that the Chair of the Committee has just made. I support the recommendations. I want to pay tribute to Stella, Elaine and the other members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee team for working very diligently to make all this happen and for bringing the report before us here today.

From listening to all the witnesses during the review, I commend the fact that TRPSI is having a very positive impact on the lives of people in rural areas. Through correspondence with the Minister, I am aware that it is on course to meet its PFG target by 31 March this year.

We have seen how MARA, the arts, the fuel poverty, the health checks and all the different components of the programme are having a meaningful impact on people's lives. Of course, on top of that, opportunities will be ushered in with the new rural development programme, which will address issues relating to social isolation and poverty.

4.30 pm

In my contribution, I will speak specifically about one of the recommendations — my colleagues will pick up on other recommendations — on deprivation and how it is measured. During the inquiry, we heard some very strong views that the current methodology for assessing deprivation, the NI multiple deprivation measure (MDM), underestimates the extent of deprivation in rural areas. That theme was particularly flagged up by the Rural Development Council (RDC), the Rural Community Network (RCN) and the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) in their contributions to the review. I commend all those groups for making their way up here; we, of course, were also out in the community meeting organisations.

Those issues were also robustly flagged up by Trutz Haase when he appeared before the Committee. Last year, other MLAs, including Patsy McGlone, and I co-hosted a seminar organised by the Carnegie Trust on this very topic, entitled 'Poverty Amongst Plenty?' One of the recurring themes is that, under the current methodology, small and concentrated areas of deprivation are more easily identified in urban areas whereas deprivation is more dispersed in rural areas. In urban areas, there is more of a social concentration of deprivation, whereas it is more widely dispersed in rural areas. You could be in poverty but living in the midst of affluent neighbours in a rural area, and that is quite extensive.

The completion of the report is timely as we begin to scrutinise the Rural Proofing Bill. Many of the themes that were raised in the review will be relevant to the Rural Proofing Bill, which has been designed to protect and develop rural areas.

A number of concerns were raised about the measures, including the fact that the MDM focuses on income and not expenditure. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's minimum income standard project concluded that it costs 20% more to live in rural areas. Proximity to services is also a big issue. The weighting that was attributed to the overall score is only 10%; a study commissioned by the Church of

Scotland and carried out by Geddes and Houston in 2012 concluded that deprivation of access is overwhelming in rural areas, which can have a significant negative impact on people's lives through employment, medical care and participation in cultural and social activities. That was supported by a study by McKendrick et al in 2011, which noted that the effect of the lower weighting, in which the domain of access to services is weighted at 10%, is that there is a negative impact. No rural areas are ranked in the top 10% of super output areas for deprivation across the North. The closest rural area that I am aware of is in Castlederg in my constituency, which ranks ninety-seventh, out of the 890.

The UFU representatives made a very good point in their contribution. They said that a method must be found to pinpoint deprivation in rural areas, unlike urban areas, which are more socially segregated. They said:

"One person could be in poverty and the person down the road could be in relative affluence."

The RDC and the RCN made the same points.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member must draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McAleer: In conclusion, there is widespread consensus among rural interest groups that the current system is not accurate. I welcome the recommendation in the review that DARD and DFP should work together to find a more effective method of measuring deprivation in rural areas.

Mr Rogers: I believe that there should be fair and equitable treatment for rural communities. Rural proofing is vital for our society as a whole, and it is important for the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive to ensure that no policy should directly or indirectly impact on the rural community.

The SDLP is in favour of a framework for tackling rural poverty and social isolation. Since the revised framework was launched in 2012, there have been a number of significant outcomes. It is important to note that many of the projects involved in the framework have been completed in conjunction with other Departments and bodies, including the Public Health Agency, DRD, DEL, DSD, the Rural Community Transport Partnership and the Rural Support Network.

We want to ensure that everything possible is done to advance the rural agenda and to help our rural communities. We believe that this DARD initiative goes some way towards helping rural dwellers who face isolation.

A key goal of the Department is to improve the lives of farmers and other rural dwellers by targeting resources where they are needed most. I believe that the framework goes some way to achieving that.

The framework identified three key priority areas for intervention in rural areas. The first is access poverty, which aims to improve rural access to statutory services. The farm families health check programme has been very successful, and I am happy that nearly 6,000 checks have been completed in 266 locations across Northern Ireland. Access to health care is a major concern of the rural people of south Down. With the dilution of services at Downe Hospital and the removal of the stroke unit from Daisy Hill Hospital, rural people are not convinced of equal access. The closure of rural primary schools is a major concern, and the effect it is having on rural communities is very worrying. Access to broadband is a major drawback for the development of our SMEs throughout our rural areas.

The second priority is around financial poverty and ensuring that incomes can be maximised. The MARA project, which somebody spoke about earlier, is managed by the Public Health Agency and aims to help households complete an electronic assessment form to help assess eligibility for grants and benefits. The main aim of the project is to make our rural dwellers aware of the help that is available out there. The project aims to make people aware of the benefits that they are entitled to and to help and instruct them on how to apply for those benefits. I am happy to see that, by the end of August 2014, the MARA project surpassed the set target of visiting 12,000 homes. I welcome the recent announcement in my area of the Mourne Home 2 Hospital scheme, which helps transport rural people to hospital.

The third priority area is social inclusion. That focuses on measures that identify and address different types of isolation experienced by different vulnerable people. Rural community transport is an essential service to all our rural dwellers. For the last number of years, there have been a number of excellent community transport partnerships that deliver a vital and flexible service throughout rural areas.

I note that, within the framework, there are several different projects aimed at reducing

social isolation. The assisted rural transport scheme has been very positive. The Contacting Elderly Rural Isolated project seems to be on track to meet its target of 81,000 additional contacts, with nearly 70,000 new contacts being made. It is also important to note the role of DRD in rural transport, as it offers funding to rural transport services.

Overall, I am pleased to note the positive outcomes that have already come from the tackling rural poverty and social inclusion framework. I hope that more can be done to help deliver the framework to improve the lives of farmers and rural dwellers and help to build a rural economy.

Mrs Dobson: I also pay tribute to Stella, Elaine and their team. It was a useful exercise for the Committee to review the Department's tackling rural poverty and social inclusion framework. It confirmed what many of us will have expected, which is that individual programmes are making important progress in the areas in which they are operating.

Throughout the review, the Committee took evidence from a range of stakeholders, which included specific organisations and schemes being singled out for praise. One that I would like to highlight — it has been mentioned before — is the very important farm families health checks programme. Agriculture is not only a job but a way of life for many of our farmers. Unfortunately, however, it is a lifestyle particularly susceptible to health challenges. Those can range from the problems connected to working long hours in a physically demanding job to isolation from health services that many other people have easy access to and do not think twice about attending. I include in that list of challenges the mental health anguish often associated with living and working in isolation and the impact of working hard for low or below farmgate prices. The health checks programme has been a potentially life-saving programme to farmers right across Northern Ireland. It flags up early warning signals, and farmers are often then signposted on.

I pay tribute to the teams of nurses who work from the portable units in all types of weather and from all sorts of locations. Their work is to be commended and their impact on farming and rural families cannot be underestimated. I feel that it was a sensible decision to concentrate efforts on regional livestock markets. It makes sense to try to grasp the attention of as many farmers as possible in one location. In fact, I reckon that the current mobile units are becoming so much of a permanent fixture that it would cause issues in the farming community if

they were to be removed. I know that a number of charities, including those that focus on mental health challenges, are considering making bids for European funding as a result of seeing the excellent work of these mobile units. Can the Minister detail what impact, if any, the recent reductions to the Public Health Agency's budget will have on the health checks? In regard to her own budget, does she believe that this is the type of programme that should be protected? I share the Committee's concern that next year's budget for the so-called tackling rural poverty and social inclusion framework was allocated according to convenience rather than need.

The Committee was especially impressed to hear the glowing reports about the MARA project. It is no surprise that it has been so busy. Our rural population is often older, and we need to bear in mind the condition of some of the housing stock in our rural areas. Many people have lived in their current homes all their lives, and many other homes have passed from one generation to another. It was inevitable that these farmhouses could have benefited from additional energy-saving measures, and I am pleased that many have had elements of that work done.

Unfortunately, however, fuel poverty remains a major and uncompromising issue in rural areas. Some of this can, of course, be put down to the absence of natural gas and the subsequent reliance on oil, which, until recently, was becoming one of the largest household outgoings. However, I believe that even more could and should be done to target these homes. The old warm homes scheme worked well for those who benefited from it, but the number of those homes was too few and the cost of the scheme was too high. It is imperative that our rural roads and laneways are not overlooked by councils because other streets of houses are easier to reach. That may be the case, but deprivation and fuel poverty do not discriminate between those who live in urban and rural areas.

There is a range of other challenges facing our rural dwellers, some of which are addressed in this Committee review and others are not. I will cite just two. The ongoing absence of affordable childcare is often a major barrier to parents in rural areas taking up and sustaining employment. Another major problem right now, and an absolute contradiction to the supposed attempts to tackle rural isolation, is the reduction of care in the community, especially of essential services like home helps.

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

Mrs Dobson: To conclude, while there has been progress made, not least in the TRPSI framework, there is still much more that needs to be done.

Mr McCarthy: I support this very important motion. As an Assembly Member representing a rural constituency, I see areas and people throughout the community who strive to keep their heads above water. It is only right and proper that the Assembly recognises all the problems and concerns experienced by rural dwellers and that we try to do something about it.

As a member of Stormont's Agriculture Committee, I welcome the finding of the TRPSI — tackling rural poverty and social inclusion — framework review. Having listened to the contributors who came to give evidence to the Committee, I will say that no one should be in any doubt about the size and scale of the problems experienced by our farming and rural communities. Our Committee Chair and other members have outlined to the Assembly the many hardships and obstacles faced by the rural population.

I would like to put on record my thanks and appreciation for the work done by our Committee staff in bringing together the many stakeholders plus affected and interested parties. Our thanks also goes to those organisations, including the Department, that submitted all the written evidence that was received and considered by the Committee and to those who attended the stakeholder event held last November at the Greenmount campus. We are extremely grateful to the Assembly's research department for providing our Committee with information on rural isolation, rural poverty, rural well-being and many more topics. Our Committee agreed that the earlier work and current programme of TRPSI was done well. The positive impacts that it has made have to be maintained and acknowledged by the allocation of finance to each project.

4.45 pm

We welcomed the comments by the RCN and the PHA about the social return on investment of the first phase of the MARA project, which stands for maximising access in rural areas. That showed that, for every pound invested by DARD and the Public Health Agency, over eight pounds were returned.

It was most gratifying to hear from the many groups involved in tackling rural poverty and isolation of their satisfaction with DARD's contribution. For instance, representatives of the Rural Development Council stated:

"We welcome the programme and commend DARD for its approach to implementation, which is largely focused on partnership working, collaboration and ...engaging rural stakeholders in communities."

Also, it has been mentioned by other Members that the farm families' health check programme got the seal of approval and commendation from the Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association, and the same appreciation came for the assisted rural travel scheme. The Minister, whom we are grateful to see, must be rubbing her hands with glee at all the commendations from other Departments. If so, let us give credit where credit is due and hope that it continues.

The MARA project has contributed enormously to tackling our rural problems. The simple fact — again, it has been mentioned — that it allowed some 14,000 householders to be visited and that those involved listened and, more importantly, acted on what they heard, has to be commended. We sincerely hope that the data gathered through the project will be wisely used by the Department to make further progress and to reduce and finally eliminate all rural poverty and isolation and to enhance social inclusion. I commend all the groups and the departmental officers for their work and dedication.

I hope that the Assembly endorses the Committee's efforts and appreciates all the positive contributions from all groups, including the Department. I also hope that the Department accepts all the recommendations and implements them without delay.

Mr Buchanan: As a Member of the Agriculture Committee, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. At the outset, I would like to thank the Committee staff for all their work, the researchers and all the stakeholders who made inputs to the inquiry.

For many who live in isolated rural areas, the tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework has been a welcome initiative that has provided much practical help and support for those who are in real need. Minimising poverty, inequality, social exclusion and disadvantage, especially among vulnerable groups in isolated rural communities, is a policy priority in the rural White Paper action plan, and

there is no doubt that, through the TRPSI framework, there is clear evidence that policy documents can become a reality and provide tangible benefits for those in greatest need. We have seen that happen with the TRPSI programme.

Unfortunately, poverty and isolation exist throughout all parts and parts of Northern Ireland, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to that problem. In urban areas, for example, a clear trend of poverty and isolation exists in certain geographical boundaries, where there are areas of affluence and poverty. While those areas can be fairly easily defined and initiatives can be put in place to target the problem, it is not the same in rural areas as no such boundaries exist, which leaves it much more difficult to tackle the problems that rural dwellers face.

No one in the House will be under any illusion as to the pressure that the farming community has been under over the past few years. Year on year, they have been squeezed so far as getting a reasonable price for their product is concerned and that, added to the difficulties posed by banks, has left many farming families struggling. Indeed, it has driven some to the point of despair.

Isolation, loneliness and economic pressures have had a substantial impact on farming families and the entire rural community. The Northern Ireland continuous household survey highlighted the fact that not only is there a growing number of people living alone but the number of people between the ages of 16 and 59 who live alone has doubled in the past 30 years. There is no doubt that that, along with the ageing population, is a contributing factor to rural isolation and loneliness. The challenge to all Departments is to work in tandem with each other to deliver for those who find themselves in such circumstances.

It is only right and proper that we acknowledge and recognise the good work that has been done through the Rural Community Network and the MARA project, as so many in the Chamber have done this evening. That work now needs to be developed further and built on. Figures show that MARA has visited some 14,000 households and helped deliver on the warm homes scheme, welfare benefits and boiler replacements to a total of £3.2 million. Its strength and success is its ability to tap into local knowledge and expertise and to do so quickly and effectively.

As we move forward in addressing the issue in rural areas, it is important to note what other

stakeholders said when they came before the Committee. The Ulster Farmers' Union said:

"While it is right and proper that DARD should continue to take the lead on this issue, we believe that there needs to be a joined-up approach to this issue. Just because DARD is the only department with 'rural' in its name does not mean that it is the only Department with responsibility for rural dwellers."

The Rural Community Network said:

"RCN believes that the challenge remains that other Departments are not taking rural poverty and social isolation into account to the degree that they should in their service delivery."

It went on to say:

"It is the responsibility of all Departments to take the lead ... every Department has a responsibility to police its money and its priority for rural as well as for urban people."

That is where I believe the challenge lies, and it is out there for all the other Departments to make rural proofing a reality, for the benefit of the rural community and the people in those areas.

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

Mr Buchanan: That is the challenge that we set out in the House this evening. Although the Agriculture Minister is taking the lead on this, the challenge is there for all the other Departments to come in and do their bit so that we can address the issue for the rural community.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The revised tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework was launched on 22 February 2012 as a DARD initiative aimed at facilitating a cross-departmental coordinated service. The purpose of the initiative is to maximise access to benefits, grants and local and regional services that will help to support vulnerable rural dwellers who are already in or are at risk of poverty and social isolation.

The framework outlines three priority areas for government to target and take action against. Those are access poverty, financial poverty and social isolation. The Agriculture Minister, who has to be commended for leading on all of this

and, indeed, for her innovative thinking on it, secured £16 million in the 2011-15 Budget period to tackle rural isolation and poverty in rural areas under the programme and has secured £5.5 million for the 2014-15 financial year. That money and the work with other Departments, such as the Health Department, have enabled us to lever down a further £11 million in match funding. That is significant investment across a range of issues such as fuel poverty, disability, the elderly and young people, to name but a few.

MARA is delivered through 13 lead community-based organisations. In the past three years, the organisations have arranged and delivered 13,700 home visits. Those visits have generated a further 36,500 individual referrals to other Departments and agencies for a variety of grants, benefits and services. With partnerships in the area of public health, the MARA project will continue into 2015-16, with a further estimated 3,000 home visits planned.

One of the many successes of the MARA project is the farm families health checks programme. Since the programme started in July 2012, 6,826 clients have presented themselves for a health check at 325 venues. Of those venues, 213 were at markets and 112 were at community events. Some 52% of the clients were subsequently advised to see their GP. Over half — over 3,000 people — were referred to their GP for a medical reason. The programme has proved to be a lifeline for farmers, as their work does not leave them time to visit GP clinics and, indeed, the location of their work means that they are isolated from the rest of the community.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I acknowledge the good work that is carried out by that group, but does the Member agree that all of that good work will be put at risk unless the massive budget cut in the Public Health Agency is rectified?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for his intervention. No, I do not think so, because you will have a range of agencies coming in to deliver the programme. There will be enough to bring that round, considering the small number that was dealing with it at the start. However, I can see where you are coming from, and I appreciate your question.

The programme has proved to be a lifeline for farmers. Another great outcome has been the

benefits check. For long enough, farmers have thought that, because they own land, they are not entitled to any benefits. The reverse has now been proven. It is important that vulnerable rural dwellers can access benefits, which are a great help to family incomes. In turn, they help address the extra costs of living in the countryside, such as fuel, transport etc. Farmers need that extra income for their families.

MARA has amassed a large volume of information for the main Departments on health, education, community development and welfare benefits. Rural living must be made more attractive. That is the point: we are now sitting with all this information. The Minister has opened the door for other agencies to come in, and they must come in and deliver on this.

I will give you some numbers from my area, to give you an idea. The north Antrim network has been delivering MARA projects since 2012. It has visited 1,600 households for a first visit. That has involved a total of nearly 1,900 individual assessments, with a follow-up of nearly 1,400 second visits to ensure referrals have been acted on. The outcome of the nearly 1,700 household visits is some 4,000 referrals.

Now that the councils have been set up, they must act on that information and make it a priority that goes into the community plans. Perhaps, the message will go out today that councils should go one step further and set up dedicated committees in their council structures that will deal with rural affairs, because, as those Members who come from a council background will know —

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

Mr McMullan: — very few councils had a committee dealing with rural affairs. I commend this.

Mr Anderson: I rise as a member of the ARD Committee to speak in support of the motion on the position paper.

Northern Ireland has a rich industrial and manufacturing heritage, but not all of it is based in towns or cities — far from it. Indeed, our agricultural base, which is an integral part of our industrial and manufacturing heritage, is central to our economy. The well-being of the rural community is therefore a big priority.

In recent decades, our agriculture industry has suffered many setbacks, and that has had a big

impact on the quality of life for our rural dwellers. As farmers' incomes have declined, they have been forced to diversify and have more than one job. They have also had to grapple with ever-increasing bureaucracy and red tape. All of that has had a major impact on morale and on the standard of living of farmers and families. Farmers are people with considerable self-respect, and they are often extremely reluctant to seek help. However, financial difficulties do not extend only to farming families. Many non-farming families are also affected, and, in the main, they are private people as well. For that reason, if for no other, I am pleased that a series of measures is being taken to address the financial hardships and pressures on those who live in the countryside.

5.00 pm

We have many folk who live in the countryside who feel vulnerable, and I think particularly of the lonely and elderly who are often targeted for brutal attack where they live in isolated areas. Tackling poverty and social exclusion is a key target for the Executive. The tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework aims to help to tackle poverty and social isolation in rural areas through a series of measures in partnership with statutory and voluntary community groups and Departments. This is a DARD commitment, but it covers a wide range of areas of life, and other Departments and agencies are required to play their part. Too often, others view rural poverty and deprivation as matters merely for DARD. The Ulster Farmers' Union, among others, made that point very strongly.

As the motion confirms, the Committee has been looking at this area, and it has been reviewing the Department's progress on its commitments under its rural anti-poverty and social exclusion programme. Our position paper sets out the details and makes recommendations.

It is obvious that the Minister and her officials are taking TRPSI seriously, and, as we gathered evidence, we were also very impressed by the extent of the efforts of a range of voluntary and community groups to make a real difference to rural dwellers' quality of life. Our paper commends the —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. The sound system is picking up interference from a mobile device. I ask Members to make sure that their mobile phones are not causing difficulties.

Mr Anderson: Our paper commends the way in which the community and voluntary sector has risen to the challenge of TRPSI. Those groups deserve the highest praise. Rural Support, which provides a listening and signposting service for farming and rural families in Northern Ireland, is to be highly commended. It has been able to deliver practical results on the ground.

One area that I regard as vital is the transport infrastructure. In the countryside, people need a car just to go about the basics of life. They do not have the easy access to facilities that those who live in towns and cities take for granted. In a recent speech on higher education, I said that no one would argue that we should have a university in every town; the same could be said for hospitals and leisure centres and so on. However, we need to ensure that rural dwellers are not disadvantaged in those things because of where they live. Services to connect with rural dwellers need to be put in place. I commend the voluntary organisations that run transport for rural dwellers, and I would like to see more coordination of planning and resources in that area.

One project that has been well mentioned today and deserves the highest praise is the maximising access to services, grants and benefits in rural areas programme, known as MARA for short. Many who gave evidence to the Committee praised MARA. It is collating a most valuable database that can only help to take TRPSI to the next stage. It is vital that there is a new TRPSI in 2016.

This was also touched on, but another area that needs to be considered is the impact of local government reform on the overall strategy to tackle rural deprivation.

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

Mr Anderson: I commend the motion and the position paper to the House. I urge the Minister to implement the paper's recommendations.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will also speak in favour of the motion. Like Members who have spoken before me, I thank our Clerk, Stella, and the Committee staff for their sterling work on this important subject. Indeed, I thank all those who took the time to contribute in any way to the review. Their experience, assessment and input have been essential in evaluating the current programme. They have identified not just the successes, of which there have been

many, but the challenges that need to be addressed.

Those challenges come in many forms. As outlined, we discussed how information could be shared, recorded and interpreted so that it could be used to best effect in the future. We have the changing nature of the difficulties facing our rural communities as a whole but particularly those impacted by poverty and isolation. For example, to name but a few, unemployment, emigration, severe weather, the added risk of stress for the growing number of lone workers on our farms and changes to public services adversely affect our rural communities. That is why it is important to take stock every so often, consult individuals and stakeholders and make recommendations such as those that the Committee is making today.

For my contribution, I want to focus on the formation of the new super-councils, the role that they will play in delivering this framework and the Committee's recommendation about them. It came as no surprise to me that the demand for information and involvement in LEADER and the local community plans exceeded expectations in the rural constituency of Mid Ulster. As a native and a representative of the area, I am only too aware of how widely dispersed the population is and how the issues and, indeed, the solutions can differ from one part of the constituency to another.

While it is important that expectations are managed for what is achievable, I am delighted that so many people came forward, presented their thoughts and ideas and expressed their willingness to play a role in shaping the priorities for local government. The new model of LEADER, with its wider local action group membership, will assist in involving a greater number of people, which I hope will ensure that the platform for raising concerns and providing new opportunities to tackle rural poverty and isolation will be as broad as possible. I believe that the councils themselves are well placed to identify areas where resources need to be targeted, but, as was suggested during the review, there will be a limited budget. To make a little go a long way, it will be imperative to match need to funding priorities and to work in partnership with all agencies and Departments, as well as voluntary and community groups, to share responsibility and best practice and to prevent duplication.

While it is right that DARD takes the lead on rural issues and provides the necessary guidance and support, it will be fully effective only when a joined-up approach is taken. I, therefore, support the recommendation that the

Department engage proactively with the new councils to ensure that they are active and vigorous in taking rural issues into account in the development of policy and the delivery of services in rural and farming communities, as well as working effectively with the groups and organisations that have been successfully involved in delivering the TRPSI framework.

In closing, I commend our Minister for her commitment in prioritising this area of work and driving this important work forward.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Choiste as an obair atá déanta acu. I thank the Committee and its staff for the work that they have done in bringing the report to the Assembly for debate. As an elected representative from a rural constituency, and having represented parts of it from 1993 onwards, I am very aware of the impact that the tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework has had in tackling poverty and social isolation in farming and rural communities. Other representatives from similar constituencies will undoubtedly agree. That said, there is room for improvement, and that is what the recommendations from the Committee's review of the Department's anti-poverty and social inclusion programme seek to achieve.

The Committee has rightly acknowledged the high level of praise and support for all who help to deliver various TRPSI framework programmes at local levels. As the Rural Development Council stated:

"local people are best placed to identify local solutions."

The groups and organisations involved with the delivery of the TRPSI framework are undoubtedly one of its strengths, and, in no small part, they are a vital component of its success. In view of that fact, the Committee has recommended that the Departments build on the successes of the current programme, including the vast knowledge already available from grass-roots organisations in rural communities, to help to inform and to shape a new TRPSI programme; I will say a bit more about that after a while. Given the importance of joined-up thinking in this area, it is surprising and, as the Committee noted, disappointing that there appeared to be no plan for a coordinated approach to make effective use of the data from the more successful projects such as MARA to inform other projects or a future TRPSI programme.

As I stand here, I consider the number of times that I have received presentations — I and others — about rural poverty, rural isolation, rural health, rural transport, when a plethora of issues comes forward. Many of those reports — I certainly hope that this will not be one of them — are sitting on shelves, having not been acted on. Hence the importance of the Committee's second recommendation, which is that the Department, in conjunction with other Departments, fully utilises the data captured and the evaluation that MARA has produced and uses it to inform and shape the TRPSI successor programme.

It is important, however, that rural matters are not thought of as the exclusive preserve of DARD. Many of the issues have cross-departmental elements and, as such, it is fitting that the Committee also recommends that DARD should undertake an evaluation of the extent to which other Departments and the wider public sector consider rural issues in respect of policy, services and resources. It is at that point, as Mr Buchanan referred to earlier, that rural proofing kicks in. Rural proofing has been about as a nebulous kind of notional issue for a long time, but when it comes to its implementation, some give a nod to its policy direction and some just mention it and do nothing about it. It is high time that we had it on a full statutory footing to deliver across the range of services, because it is not just DARD; it is health, transport, jobs, training, and skills for young people. It is basically about getting social services and care community packages into areas. All of that forms part of rural proofing or, more to the point, the extent and level of services that should be delivered to communities and people in rural areas. Therefore, the Departments and the wider public sector must consider those rural issues in respect of policy, services and resources.

The Committee further recommends that DARD develops an interdepartmental working group with the buy-in of senior civil servants in the relevant Departments. One area of particular concern that the Committee highlighted was the impact that the new super-councils will have on the delivery of services. There are real concerns that new councils may not always have a rural focus — some are big rural councils; others have an amalgam of rural and more urban — and that policy and service delivery may be concentrated on serving urban areas.

Expectations have been raised, particularly in my constituency, as a result of the community planning process, but limited budgets may

result in disappointment, and rural communities are concerned that there may in fact —

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

Mr McGlone: — be fewer services to rural areas. There is real need, as the Committee recommends. I support the Committee's report.

Mr Elliott: First, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the debate about the report. Secondly, I apologise to the proposer of the motion and to those who made contributions at an early stage for not being present. I am sure that they will get over that. Thirdly, I add my thanks to the Committee staff and the research teams who carried out much work for the project and the inquiry.

Before I get into the main aspects, I want to point out that living in rural areas in Northern Ireland is not all negative. We should not look on everything as having a negative aspect, because there are some very good positives as well. There are advantages, and many of us recognise that. As there has been such a demand over recent years for people to live in the countryside, it proves that many people enjoy the countryside and the pleasures of living there. However, there are many disadvantages.

I want to start off by talking about rural childcare, which was mentioned earlier, and, in particular, affordable rural childcare. Childcare centres, especially those in rural areas where they do not have the numbers of children attending them, are under huge pressure, particularly in relation to some of the guidance and procedures that have come forward from the health agencies. I ask the Minister to have a look at that at some stage. That says to me that one Department in the Executive is not consulting or doing what another Department wants —

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the Noble indices have as much to do with childcare and the lack of childcare in certain areas because of deprivation levels and how they look at them, and that that is out of the hands of everybody? The Noble indices now need to look at the rural dweller and give the mothers in the countryside better access to childcare.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

5.15 pm

Mr Elliott: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not disagree that the Noble indices may have a part to play in it, but I can tell you from my experience in Fermanagh that I have met a number of childcare providers in recent weeks. They have found that, because of new guidelines and procedures coming down from health agencies and the increased numbers of staff that they have to have in order to satisfy the criteria, they find it absolutely impossible to provide that level of staffing for the number of children who come onto their premises. That means that they cannot provide affordable childcare. If they have to raise their fees by £2 per hour per child, it will leave some of those working parents unable to go out to work. It would be much more cost-effective for them to stay at home and not take on that part-time or full-time job. There is a real issue there that needs to be looked at. I have already found that on the ground in my constituency, Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

That leads me to the second negative aspect — if you want to look at it in that way — which is access to services in rural areas. I recall doing a Consumer Council public transport challenge — it must have been seven or eight years ago — in which it was suggested that I make a series of appointments and use public transport to attend them. As you will appreciate, there is no train service in County Fermanagh, so it was much more difficult, and I was limited in the public transport that I could use. I found that you had to make appointments around the times of the bus or public transport service as opposed to getting the public transport to suit whatever time you had made the appointment. You had to do the thing the opposite way around from how you would normally do it. I found that a difficult challenge.

The third aspect is about working in isolation. Working and living in isolation in the countryside can be a very lonely experience. We all know how the farming community has suffered financially over the last number of years and what significant pressure it has been under. That significant pressure can almost always be worse if you work in isolation, as many in the farming community do. Mental health and suicide issues have been a major traumatic experience in rural communities, and I pay tribute to Rural Support for the work it carries out. Also, when accidents happen, there is often nobody on hand to help. Once you have had an accident, you are on your own, and you are left in isolation. In the last few months, a farmer who lives close to me was attacked by his animals — or that is the thought —

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

Mr Elliott: — and he was not found until the next morning. Because he was working in isolation, he did not have the help, backup and provision that you might have in a more urban area.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. It has been very useful and helpful, and I welcome the fact that people are very positive about the work that is being done through TRPSI. I welcome the positive comments that have been made. Many Members have talked about the benefits of living in a rural community, but there certainly are challenges. Issues of poverty and isolation are very much a reality on the ground. I see it very much as my responsibility to take the lead in trying to bring forward measures to address those areas.

Most Members referred to the fact that this is not just the business of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; it is the business of all Departments. Rural communities are entitled to the same services as others. I look forward to more cooperation with other Departments in taking forward the measures that we have set out and any new measures that we develop.

I greatly value the work that the Committee has done in producing the report, and I intend to pick up on the recommendations as I respond to the issues that have been set out. I am grateful for the report, and I assure the Committee that, in setting out future plans for tackling rural poverty and isolation, the report will help us in our considerations.

Many Members talked about the importance and the practical delivery of the TRPSI framework, and it is very focused on developing interventions and actions that can help to alleviate rural poverty and isolation and complement and add value to existing government strategies and, of course, help rural communities to help themselves. Due to the complex and multidimensional factors that contribute to poverty and isolation in rural areas, a one-size-fits-all approach definitely could not work. It would most likely result in only addressing pockets of rural isolation or distinct poverty issues. For that reason, the Department has, along with our partners, developed a broad spectrum of actions in an attempt to address the wide range of poverty

and isolation-related needs in rural communities.

Members highlighted many very positive projects. I want to provide Members with a short overview of the actions that have been delivered and, in many cases, continue to be delivered as part of the TRPSI programme. I think that it is helpful to relate the actions to the three key priority areas identified in the framework: access poverty, financial poverty and social isolation. I will be happy to respond to any queries, and I will hopefully pick up on all the issues that Members have raised.

The MARA project, to which Members referred, is one of our multifaceted schemes in that it targets financial poverty, access poverty and isolation simultaneously. MARA is being delivered in partnership with the Public Health Agency, and, in this phase of the project to date, over 13,700 vulnerable rural households have been visited. That has generated 36,000 referrals for grants, benefits and local and regional services.

Through the recently completed rural challenge programme, my Department offered a small grant of up to £10,000 each to 44 organisations. Those projects, which concluded their work in December past, have helped over 6,700 individuals, with issues such as financial capability, mental health issues, parenting skills and exclusion all being tackled. Since 2012, the rural support helpline has received over 1,600 calls, all of which have been dealt with quietly and efficiently by their experienced team of volunteers to assist and signpost them to services that can help with problems such as farm finance, paperwork, inheritance, succession, stress and isolation. My Department is working with Libraries NI to extend the Health in Mind initiative in rural areas to increase understanding of mental health issues through reading, learning and information. The farm families health scheme has had a very positive impact to date, with over 6,800 clients availing themselves of a check-up at 325 venues. All Members referred to the benefit of that scheme.

I know that some concerns were raised about the Public Health Agency's role in funding the project, but I can confirm for Members that it has committed its funding for the 2015-16 financial year. That allows us to carry forward that scheme. For me and as everyone has said, it is a scheme that gives tremendous benefit to farmers who, often, will not seek medical help; however, while they are at the marts, this mobile service is there and has

certainly been of tremendous benefit. I look forward to rolling it out further.

Through partnership with the Department for Regional Development, my Department has implemented a scheme that has constructed 63 private borewells where accessing the public water mains supply is not technically or financially feasible. Through the assisted rural travel scheme, which enables SmartPass holders to avail themselves of concessionary travel on rural community transport partnership vehicles, it has funded more than 700,000 passenger trips. The connecting elderly rural isolated programme has helped more than 1,900 elderly individuals and involved 10 community organisations that facilitate the scheme in assisting supported home living.

In relation to fuel poverty, we have supported the installation of whole-house energy efficiency improvements in over 500 rural households, and over 1,300 low-income rural families have benefited from loft and cavity insulation. The BOOST youth employability scheme has supported nearly 1,300 rural young people to develop core industry-recognised skills and therefore improve their prospects of getting into paid employment. In addition, through the rural youth entrepreneurship programme, my Department has supported over 660 young people who have participated in workshops to explore their enterprise and their entrepreneurial potential. My Department's support for community development through the network of subregional rural community development support organisations also complements the objectives of the RDP by improving the economic capability of rural areas, increasing access to funding programmes and building capacity in rural communities.

Members will also be aware that priority 6 of the new rural development programme, which will be delivered by the local action groups, has a specific focus on poverty reduction and tackling rural isolation and will provide another avenue for funding that will complement and add value to TRPSI.

I am delighted with the impact that the interventions have had, and are continuing to have, in rural areas and that the detailed review undertaken by the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development has endorsed the work done through TRPSI and supported the full range of initiatives. Of course, we cannot stand still. There is still a lot to be done, and more that we can do. I have extended the Programme for Government commitment for TRPSI by £4 million into 2015-16. That will

enable most of the schemes to continue where they are needed.

Members will be aware that the Department's TRPSI framework has an associated Programme for Government target to bring forward a £13 million package of measures to tackle rural poverty and isolation. We are very much on track to achieve that target. I can assure the House that officials are working very hard, in conjunction with the various delivery partners, to ensure that the package of measures that I outlined reaches out to and continues to support the greatest number of those most in need.

Through the various TRPSI interventions, literally tens of thousands of rural people have benefited, and the impacts that the interventions have had on the lives of many cannot be overestimated. Indeed, in a lot of cases, they are life-changing. It is also worth noting that, through working in partnership with other agencies and Departments, it is conservatively estimated at this stage that the package of measures delivered has levered in over £12 million to date. That is all significant investment in rural communities.

We have taken the views of many different organisations into account. TRPSI could not be a one-size-fits-all package. It has had to be multidimensional, and our discussions with the public and voluntary sectors are reflective of that. My Department has been creative in using different approaches to target distinct needs in rural communities. Some, such as MARA and the farm family health checks programme, have involved visiting individual households or going to where the hardest-to-reach people can be found, as opposed to waiting for them to come to us. For other schemes, we have used workshops and the media to promote and encourage participation. That flexible approach has worked, and so too has the approach of working in conjunction with other Departments and agencies.

Looking forward, I remain firmly committed to tackling issues of rural poverty and isolation, and I am pleased to have extended the tackling rural poverty and social isolation programme into 2015-16, with an associated extension to the Programme for Government target of £4 million.

Already for 2015-16, plans are well developed to continue to assist rural transport, access and associated health issues; to maximise access to benefits and services; to support rural community development; to support youth employment and entrepreneurship; and to

assist fuel poverty and broadband issues. In addition, officials are looking at options to provide support to help community and voluntary groups make available much-needed resources for their local communities. I particularly refer to new areas of work, such as a small capital grants scheme for community groups and a rural transport initiative.

I will continue to listen to the needs of rural dwellers, and I thank the Committee again for its recommendations, which will all be considered when developing future initiatives. In saying that, I believe that, from the contributions today, the House is very aware of, and very much wedded to, the benefit of the tackling poverty and social isolation work. We have the opportunity to build on the good work that has been done to date in the time ahead.

The six key recommendations in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development's position paper look at how the TRPSI work is developed and taken forward. I am committed to working with other Departments, councils and statutory agencies to consider how best we can deliver collectively for rural communities. Those are key considerations for the TRPSI programme going forward. The report will assist in the evaluation of the programme and help us set out a chart for the way forward.

Some Members referred to my intention to bring forward primary legislation in this Assembly mandate to strengthen rural proofing across government, subject to Executive agreement. The proposed rural proofing Bill will support the equitable treatment of rural dwellers by requiring their needs and the impact on rural communities to be addressed appropriately in the development and delivery of policy and public services. The policy proposals for the Bill are out to public consultation until 16 March 2015, and I encourage people to respond to the consultation.

On recommendations 3 and 4, my proposals for a rural proofing Bill include a requirement for DARD to gather and compile information on rural proofing and to publish a monitoring report to be laid before the Assembly.

That will provide an accountability mechanism and greater transparency of the extent to which rural proofing is carried out. It will also include a duty on councils to take into account the needs of rural dwellers in the development of policy and the delivery of services.

5.30 pm

With regard to recommendation five, my Department is represented on the statistics coordinating group, which is a cross-departmental group considering a review of the multiple deprivation measures. DARD has recommended that there needs to be a full, in-depth review of the measures that should take account of rural-specific issues.

Regarding recommendation six, officials are liaising with partner organisations on how best to use the capital budget in 2015-16, and the evaluation and planning of the post 2015-16 TRPSI programme will include longer-term plans for capital investment.

I will finish there and thank everybody for their contribution to the debate. It has been very positive. One of the Members said that I would be rubbing my hands with glee at all the positivity in the room, but I am rubbing my hands with glee for rural dwellers. This is a fantastic project that we can build on strongly in the time ahead, and I look forward to working with other Departments. I firmly believe, given the sentiment that has been expressed today, that rural dwellers' issues are not just the responsibility of this Department but of the Executive as a whole.

Mr Irwin: Our Deputy Chairperson, Mr Joe Byrne, was to wind up today, but he sends his apologies for missing the debate. I am therefore doing the wind in his place. I thank the staff of the Committee for all the hard work and effort that they have put in with regard to the programme and the inquiry over the last number of months.

As Chairperson of the Committee, at the start of this debate, I outlined the background and highlighted the main recommendations that we are presenting to the Minister. I was very interested in her reply, and I look forward to reading Hansard and giving due consideration to the points she made.

I am delighted to see so many people taking part in the debate. Rural issues and rural development have tended to be overlooked to a degree. I am glad that the debate has brought the issues to the fore, and I am pleased to be able to emphasise on the Floor of the Assembly the outstanding work that the community and voluntary groups have been doing. That has been one of the key themes of the debate, and it is great to see the work of rural groups recognised and acknowledged.

Another theme emerging is the success of the individual projects in the overall TRPSI framework, particularly the MARA project.

Some here today have referred to the statistical evidence of the great work that MARA has done, but the success of MARA owes much to its approach. It is an approach that we would like to see duplicated and retained in any future TRPSI programme.

The issue of rural deprivation has also been raised by many MLAs representing rural constituencies. We know how big an issue this is, and that is why we need to see work started as soon as possible on the review of how rural deprivation is measured and used. While there is guidance on how to apply deprivation indices in rural areas, it is disappointing that there is no evidence to suggest that this guidance is being used.

I will now summarise the contributions made by other Members. Mr McAleer commented on rural deprivation and outlined some of the issues in how it is measured. Seán Rogers felt that there was a need to ensure that no policy had a negative impact on the rural community and that steps needed to be taken to continue to advance services and facilities in rural areas. Jo-Anne Dobson paid tribute to the farm families health checks and praised the nurses who delivered the programme.

Kieran McCarthy said that the rural community continually strives to keep its head above water and that many problems continue. He said that TRPSI is to be commended for its success and that stakeholders were happy with DARD and the partnership approach.

Mr McMullan commended the Minister for TRPSI. He said there had been significant investment across the Departments to deliver programmes and there have been many successes to date. Ian Milne felt that there was a challenge to make sure of all information gathered to date and to use it effectively. He said that councils need to work in partnership to share responsibility and good practice.

While Mr McGlone welcomed the impact that TRPSI has had, he said that there is room for improvement. He then focused on the data captured from MARA. He said that super-councils have a role to play.

Tom Elliott said that there is a need for revised guidance on childcare provision and said that it is becoming unaffordable. He said that access to services is an ongoing issue and that transport problems are also a concern for the rural dweller. He also said that working and living in isolation leads to mental health problems.

Tom Buchanan said that, just because DARD is the only Department with "rural" in its name, it does not mean that it should be the only Department covering rural services. He said that it is important that other Departments are involved.

Sydney Anderson, like many others, praised the rural stakeholders for their commitment and work. He singled out rural transport as the main issue affecting rural communities.

I think that that has covered everyone. Thank you.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the effective impact the tackling rural poverty and social inclusion (TRPSI) framework has had on the farming and rural community; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to implement the recommendations outlined in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development position paper on the review of the TRPSI framework.

Adjourned at 5.38 pm.



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Published by Authority of the Northern Ireland Assembly,
Belfast: The Stationery Office

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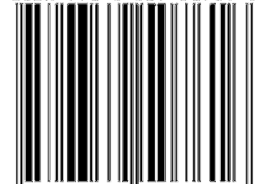
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ISSN 1463-7162

Daily Editions: Single copies £5, Annual subscriptions £325
Bound Volumes of Debates are issued periodically during the session: Single copies: £90

Printed in Northern Ireland by The Stationery Office Limited
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ISBN 978-0-339-50761-6



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