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Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 October 2015

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I have an announcement to make.

Ministerial Appointment: Mr Bell

Mr Speaker: I have to advise the House that the Rt Hon Peter Robinson, as nominating officer for the DUP, nominated Mr Jonathan Bell MLA as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Mr Bell accepted the nomination and affirmed the Pledge of Office in the presence of the Principal Deputy Speaker and the director of clerking and reporting on Tuesday 6 October 2015. I am satisfied that the requirements of Standing Orders have been met. Let us move on.

Executive Committee Business

Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill: Second Stage

Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill [NIA Bill 56/11-16] be agreed.

The Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill will update and modernise the law relating to credit unions and industrial and provident societies (IPSs) and represents the latest step in the ongoing reforms of these sectors. Mutuals make a very significant contribution to the Northern Ireland economy, playing a crucial role in many sectors, for example, financial services and agriculture. I am, therefore, pleased to have introduced this Bill, which will give greater operational flexibility and help to ensure that they can continue to grow and thrive.

To ensure that this legislation is meaningful and effective, my Department has undertaken a period of thorough consultation with those who would be most affected by legislative change. Following initial discussions with key stakeholders, public consultation on proposed changes took place in 2013. I am pleased to say there has been considerable interest and engagement from the mutuals sector, with significant input from representative organisations, individual societies and trade bodies. Policy proposals were further refined following the helpful input from my colleagues in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who clearly appreciate the role played by mutuals and have given the contents of the Bill a great deal of thought.

I would like to turn first to credit unions. Since they were first established in Northern Ireland in

the 1960s, they have grown significantly and have come to play a key role in offering financial services to their local communities. To ensure that credit unions operate within the most appropriate regulatory and legislative framework, my Department has taken forward a considerable programme of reform in recent years. In March 2012, regulation of credit unions successfully passed from my Department to the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Conduct Authority. That allowed credit unions to expand the range and type of services that they can offer, and it better protected members' savings. At that time, my Department provided financial support to the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions so that they could help individual credit unions adjust to the new regulatory environment. The Bill builds on and complements those earlier changes.

A key objective at the outset of this exercise was to examine what services credit unions were permitted to offer in Great Britain and consider whether they should apply in Northern Ireland. However, what is suitable for the credit union movement elsewhere in the UK may not be appropriate for Northern Ireland. There are therefore a number of measures that were consulted upon that are not being taken forward at this time. The resulting policy decisions in the Bill have the aim of giving Northern Ireland credit unions greater operational freedom without moving away from their mutual, socially beneficial and community-based roots.

There are seven clauses in the Bill that concern credit unions. I will touch on what each is intended to achieve. Clause 1 will allow credit unions, for the first time, to extend membership beyond individuals. Corporate bodies and organisations such as local businesses, community groups and sports clubs will be allowed to save with their local credit union. I should add that the Bill contains safeguards and restrictions that apply to corporate members, and those should ensure that the unique credit union ethos is unaffected.

Clause 2 concerns the common bond, which is the qualification for membership of a credit union. The clause specifically concerns members who no longer meet their credit union's common bond; for example, when someone moves to a different area or takes up a new occupation. Those non-qualifying members are currently subject to a limit and can make up no more than 10% of a credit union's membership. Where that limit is breached, a person could be obliged to change their financial services provider or repay any outstanding loans simply because they have

moved house or have changed their job. The clause removes this limit, allowing individual credit unions to decide themselves how many non-qualifying members is appropriate.

Clause 3 will allow credit unions to offer a new product: shares that entitle the holder to interest rather than a dividend. This will offer consumers greater choice and allow credit unions to reach a broader customer base. As with corporate membership, there will be safeguards attached to interest-bearing shares, with the aim of ensuring that credit unions are equipped to offer them.

Clause 4 concerns members with an outstanding loan and their shareholdings. At present, in certain circumstances, a member with a loan may not make a savings withdrawal until they have applied for and obtained permission from their credit union's board of directors. This stands in contrast with most other financial providers. This clause will, in essence, bring the decision on withdrawal forward in time, ensuring that a member taking out a loan knows from the outset whether or not they can withdraw their savings. This removes a degree of uncertainty for members and credit unions.

Clause 5 makes a minor change to how much a credit union can charge when it provides a copy of its rules to someone.

Clause 6 is another deregulatory measure and applies when a credit union uses surplus funds for social, cultural or charitable purposes. At present, a credit union can do this only when a dividend of at least 3% is paid. Credit unions stand at the heart of their communities, and it is clear that they place great importance on local development. That 3% restriction, however, can serve to prevent a credit union from making even a very modest contribution. This clause will, therefore, remove that restriction, giving credit unions greater latitude to support their local communities.

Clause 7 is a technical measure that will address a lacuna in existing law, ensuring that the directors disqualification regime applies to all Northern Ireland credit unions. The changes that I have outlined will ensure that our credit unions in Northern Ireland will be able to compete more effectively with other providers of financial services.

I have talked about credit unions, but this Bill will also update the legislation applying to industrial and provident societies. These societies comprise an important part of Northern Ireland's commercial landscape and

represent some of our largest and most successful businesses. Public consultation in 2013 sought comments on six proposed measures, and instructive views were received from a range of stakeholders, who, in general, welcomed the suggested changes. The measures included in the Bill are intended to be deregulatory, giving societies greater operational flexibility, with one measure in particular seeking to clarify societies' status. That clarification measure is the first clause in the Bill applying to these societies, clause 8. The term "industrial and provident society" is generic and covers two types of organisation, cooperative societies and community-benefit societies. Although administratively useful, the expression is not truly descriptive of either type of society and may not be helpful to those who are unfamiliar with the sector. Therefore, clause 8 will require new societies to be registered as one or the other as appropriate and will rename industrial and provident societies legislation.

Clause 9 gives societies greater freedom in how they engage with younger people. At present, only those over 16 years of age can be members of a society.

The Bill will remove that restriction, allowing societies to set their own membership age limit. The Bill will also reduce from 18 to 16 the minimum age at which persons can hold office. The clause also gives societies the freedom to maintain the existing age restrictions if it suits their circumstances.

10.45 am

Clause 10 removes a restriction on shareholding and will allow members to hold an unlimited number of shares that can be transferred to other members. It also raises the limit on withdrawable shares that an individual can hold in a society from £20,000 to £100,000. That amount has not been increased since 1991, and it should facilitate greater investment in the sector. Clauses 11 and 12 are also deregulatory. Clause 11 allows societies to choose their own year of account, and clause 12 removes a requirement to audit interim accounts. Both clauses remove unnecessary regulation and make it easier for societies to carry out their day-to-day business. Clause 13 is the final substantive clause, and it will make it easier for dormant societies to dissolve, removing administrative burdens from remaining societies and from government.

The Bill is broad-ranging, and its provisions follow a thorough and productive process of

engagement with stakeholders in the sector and further afield. It will help to modernise the environment in which credit unions, cooperatives and community benefit societies operate and help them to adapt to a rapidly changing financial and economic environment.

I look forward to Members' contributions. I ask that they make their contributions now — their time is unlimited because it is legislation — and I will seek to respond to them during my closing statement as opposed to being interrupted. I will try to cover as many as possible.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as an Bille seo a chur faoi bhráid an Tionóil. I thank the Minister for moving the Bill's Second Stage. The Committee welcomes the introduction of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill and thanks the Minister and, indeed, his predecessor for their work and for bringing the Bill to the Assembly today.

The Bill is of particular interest to the Committee because it has arisen as a result of an inquiry by the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment during the previous mandate. That inquiry's recommendations sought support to help to broaden the range of services that credit unions can offer to their members, thereby bringing credit unions more into line with what their counterparts in GB and the rest of Ireland can offer. Many of the Committee's recommendations have been accepted and enacted through Westminster legislation, and the Bill seeks to enact more of the Committee's recommendations.

The Committee recognises the vital role played by credit unions here, with around 34% of the adult population of the North being members of a credit union compared with around just 2% in GB. Credit unions were originally established to address the needs of vulnerable people who were being exploited for profit, a situation that is replicated today through high-rate lenders, payday loans and loan sharks. The community standing of credit unions is to be commended. Evidence demonstrates that, in contrast to other financial services providers, trust in the credit union sector remains consistently high.

Credit unions and cooperative and community benefit societies exist for the benefit of their members and are owned by the communities in which they operate. They do not speculate with members' money. The Irish League of Credit Unions alone has almost 100 credit unions with

almost £1 billion in savings, almost half a billion pounds in loans and total assets of well over £1 billion, making them a significant player in the financial services sector.

It is time to recognise that credit unions are not second-class providers. As a sector, it is a well-established, trusted mainstream player in the financial services field. One of the reasons for undertaking the inquiry was to ensure that this fact was recognised and credited. The provisions in the Bill will help to further establish the rightful place of credit unions as that trusted, reliable mainstream provider. The provisions will also provide credit unions with greater flexibility and further enhance the contribution that they make to the community that they serve.

The Committee's stamp is already firmly on the Bill. As the policy was developed, the Department kept the Committee informed of progress. As a result, the Committee was able to undertake considerable pre-legislative scrutiny, including the taking of oral evidence on a number of occasions from the Department, the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions. Consequently, the Committee was able to advise the Department and make a number of recommendations that were accepted. These were either included in the Bill as drafted or removed from the original policy proposals at the request of the Committee. This resulted in a Bill that contains legislative proposals that have already undergone thorough Committee scrutiny.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister and, in particular, his officials, who proved to be well informed, across their brief and receptive to sensible ideas that emanated from the results of our inquiry and the evidence that we took. They had continuing engagement with the Committee and provided invaluable support during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the policy proposals. That thorough approach, in advance of drafting the Bill, has resulted in a Bill that, by and large, meets the needs of the Committee, the Department and, most importantly, the credit union sector and its members. The Committee will continue to engage with the sector and other stakeholders throughout Committee Stage and will thoroughly scrutinise any further issues as they arise.

Two key clauses are of particular interest to the Committee because of the considerable benefits they can bring to credit unions and communities. Clause 6 will relax restrictions and provide more flexibility to enable credit unions to apply up to 10% of surplus funds for

social, cultural or charitable purposes. That was a key recommendation in the credit union inquiry, and clause 6 is very much welcomed by the Committee as a means of helping credit unions to fulfil their ethos and give back to communities.

Clause 1 also arises as a result of a key recommendation in the Committee inquiry. The clause makes provision to allow credit unions to admit corporate members. The Committee very much welcomes the inclusion of provisions for corporate membership of credit unions. However, concerns remain that, for unincorporated bodies, it is proposed that membership will be in the name of an individual rather than in the name of an organisation. The Committee took considerable written and oral evidence on that single issue and has continued detailed engagement with the Department on the matter. The Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions have significant reservations about that aspect of the proposal. Both organisations informed the Committee that they would accept the proposal on the basis that the matter can be revisited at a later stage. The Department has assured the Committee that it will continue to work with the ILCU and the UFCU to discuss further changes to the legislation with Treasury, the Financial Conduct Authority, the Prudential Regulation Authority and the Financial Services Compensation Scheme after the Bill comes into force.

It is evident that the current proposal for membership of credit unions by unincorporated bodies is unsatisfactory. However, the Committee and the Department must balance the need to pass legislation within the permitted time frame with the prospect of having the legislation amended at a later date. The Committee is engaged with the Department in exploring the possibility of an amendment to include a clause requiring the Minister to review the provisions in clause 1 and report to the Committee after the legislation is passed. The Department has shown some reluctance on the matter. However, the Committee — we discussed it this morning just before the debate — considers it a suitable compromise and is keen to see it enacted.

Time is becoming critical if this legislation is to pass through the House. The Committee will therefore engage further with the Department on this matter at the earliest opportunity. If the Department is willing to bring an amendment at Consideration Stage, rather than rely on the Committee to do so during Committee Stage, it would very much expedite the matter.

The Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority have recently undertaken a consultation on the reform of the legacy credit unions sourcebook. It includes a proposal to restrict the amount of money that any one member can have with a credit union to £75,000. Here is the important bit: this provision may be in conflict with clause 10, as that clause removes the limit on the holding of non-withdrawable shares in credit unions and increases the limit for withdrawable shares to £100,000. That is something that the Department, and perhaps the Minister, might like to look at to ensure that those provisions are compatible, as, at first glance, it seems that they are not.

The Committee has written to the PRA and FCA to urge them to fully consider the provisions in the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill to ensure that any revised arrangements do not conflict with either the Bill proposals or the spirit of the proposed legislation. The Committee has also asked the PRA and the FCA to engage fully with the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions to consider their objectives and requirements fully prior to the development of final proposals. A copy of that correspondence has been forwarded to the Department.

As I said earlier, the Committee has given considerable time to the consideration of the policy proposals during pre-legislative scrutiny and, subject to the Committee's consideration of any further submissions to the call for evidence, is broadly satisfied at this stage with the remaining provisions in the Bill relating to credit unions.

In addition to the clauses relating to credit unions, there are a number of clauses pertaining to cooperative and community benefit societies. In its deliberations to date, the Committee has considered these to be reasonable and appropriate but will, of course, give all aspects of the Bill full consideration during Committee Stage.

The Committee very much welcomes the introduction of the Bill and looks forward to further constructive and productive engagement with the Department — let me emphasise again that we have had such engagement — during other aspects of Committee Stage. Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tréaslú agus aontú le cuid mhór dar dhúirt an Cathaoirleach agus fáilte a chur roimh an Aire arais inniu. I want of

course to echo the comments of the Committee Chair and also welcome back the Minister. He shows good judgement in coming back today to move the credit union Bill. Credit unions are vital to the success of our society, and the credit union movement, right across this jurisdiction, will be delighted that we are getting our act together. It has been very patient and has waited for some years now. We have debated this and it is important legislation.

It is my view that a strong community has a strong credit union at its heart. When we look at the strong communities that we have across the state, we often see that, right at their heart, is a strong credit union giving leadership, getting involved in the community and building for the future.

I notice that the credit union movement in the South of Ireland is talking about becoming a "third force" to back the two pillar banks. I will not use that particular term, but, certainly, in economic and community development, credit unions are a force and a power for good.

I want to finish because my colleague late of this parish, Phil Flanagan, will speak at greater length about the legislation. However, I want to single out and praise a credit union. It is not in my constituency — my debt resides in the Divis View Credit Union in west Belfast, and I am very proud of that credit union. Newington Credit Union in north Belfast is cross-community, deeply involved in the local housing association, involved in giving bursaries to students to ensure that they can get to third-level education and involved in a project in Zambia in the developing world as well. If we take leadership and inspiration and follow the lead of credit unions, we will be doing well.

I welcome the work that is going on today and I look forward to studying this legislation further at Committee Stage. There are, perhaps, some tweaks that need to be made, but I think that this is a good day for the Assembly and for credit unions. Anything that makes credit unions stronger in the time ahead will make our community stronger.

11.00 am

Mr Cochrane-Watson: As I rise to address this important legislation, I feel very privileged and honoured that the Minister is giving us his time to move the motion before he resigns at lunchtime. It is life-or-death legislation that we are talking about: the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill. I am very excited to stand and address it. I am not sure whether the 373,000 people on the

waiting lists for our hospitals would be as excited by the performance of the Assembly today. I am not sure if it would be well received that, when we brought the crisis in our hospitals and in our health sector to this Chamber for debate to try and address the waiting lists for cancer patients —

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. My understanding is that, when we are speaking on legislation, we have to speak on the legislation and the topic of it. I am happy to respond to the need to respond to the murder of Kevin McGuigan from the Member's party, whose Minister has already resigned and left us in the lurch in DRD and left the Department in a mess. I will respond to those things, if I am allowed to do so, but I think it is unfair for Members to make allegations, while the rules that apply to me are that I must speak to the legislation.

Mr Speaker: On that point, I have given a certain amount of latitude, and I actually anticipated that some Members would be unable to resist the temptation to make some cross-references. I really am looking forward to hearing why you were so excited to speak about this particular Bill, and I am sure that you are about to tell us.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: It is such a life-or-death Bill. It makes such a difference to the wider community. I am sure it will go down as a memorable day for the Assembly in delivering, unlike many other days of late when we have not been able to effectively debate important measures brought to the Chamber.

Moving to the matter in hand, I thank the Chairman of the Committee. This is the first piece of legislation for which I have listened to the scrutiny activity, and I am delighted to see it brought to the Chamber. It does make a lot of difference, and I am very committed. As has already been said, a strong community needs a strong credit union.

I would just like to mention clause 1 in particular. One area of concern felt by the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions and the Irish League of Credit Unions is the suggestion that all accounts should be registered in the name of an individual and not in that of a corporate body. I believe that this is misguided. I believe that, as the Chairman has said, it needs further work. It would appear that guidance on this has been sought through Her Majesty's Treasury. It has committed that it has taken up responses from the credit union sector. However, no one from the Irish League of Credit Unions or the

Ulster Federation of Credit Unions seemed to be aware of that.

In summarising the many concerns around this clause, we would identify the following flaws in the approach to corporate accounts, as detailed in the Bill. A limited company is a legal entity in its own right and, therefore, accounts must be opened in the name of that limited company. Unincorporated accounts from bodies trading within the SME sector, and from clubs and societies, should be opened in the name of the business or club/society, as takes place in the banks throughout Northern Ireland. These accounts are opened in the name of that business or organisation and are operated by authorised signatories. Obviously, there is no reason why similar arrangements should not prevail for credit unions. I know that, as something of note, the Chairman has already highlighted that it needs further work. My party would support that; it is our main concern. I hope that the Minister will take these concerns on board before he decides to hokey-cokey his way out of office at lunchtime.

Mr Lunn: I rise, not as a member of this Committee as usual, so it is with one hand tied behind my back; not for the first time, but it does not matter. I am a considerable admirer of the credit union movement. I always have been. It has stayed true to its roots down the years. I think that it is 55 years now since it was established up here.

There has never been a failure. They have operated a simple model of investment and lending that has been sound and, while financial institutions have collapsed all around them, they have steered a steady course through the whole thing and are much to be admired.

I remember saying a couple of years ago, when the FSA took over control of regulation of credit unions, that they should be careful what they wish for because they might find that the FSA operates with a very heavy hand. I think that that has been the case in some ways, but I do not see much in this particular legislation that needs to concern the movement or us.

The Minister said in his introduction that this was the latest step in updating the regulations. That is fine. He also said that it would give credit unions more operational flexibility without moving away from their mutual and community-bound roots: I think that that was the wording that he used. That is absolutely correct, and that is how it should be. I think that, at all times, the movement needs to remember where it came from and not turn into any kind of risk-

taking organisation. If you want an example of what can go horribly wrong, even in this country, just think of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS) and what happened there.

I have the same reservations about clause 1 as those mentioned by the Chairman of the Committee, in that an unincorporated association had to be represented as a member of the credit union by an individual member of that association. I do not follow the rationale for that. That is not the case, as I think Mr Cochrane-Watson said, with a bank account, so why impose it on a credit union? There is a possibility that it could introduce an element of risk to the association involved, having to rely on the judgement of one member in its dealings with the credit union. I think that you said that there is not much tinkering required here, but maybe there is a need for a small tinker there. However, we will see.

I like the look of clause 3, which deals with interest-bearing shares. Well, why not? It is a good, forward-looking step. Clause 6, as I read it, means that the figure of 3% that the dividend previously had to reach before surplus funds could be offered for community purposes is being done away with. That is fine, as far as it goes. Clause 9 deals with members who are under the age of 18. Well, society is moving that way, is it not? It will not be long before 16-year-olds can vote for us — or not, according to their leanings. I see no reason why your average 16-year-old should not now be allowed to be an investor in a registered society, or even an office-bearer. I think that that is a forward step.

Clause 10 amends the £20,000 limit on withdrawable shares and replaces it with a new maximum of £100,000. I think that the Minister said that this limit dates from 1991, which is 24 years ago. I do not know what inflation has been over those 24 years, but I imagine that the £100,000 now proposed is not a lot different to what £20,000 was then. It will certainly improve the scope and the range of what the credit union can offer. By way of a caveat, it also means that there could be a considerable withdrawal of money in unexpected situations; there are always two sides.

That is really all that I wanted to say about the Bill, but I will repeat what I have said previously about credit unions: the more they imitate banks, the more they will become like banks and they will be susceptible to the risks that banks have fallen foul of over the years. I really hope that they can operate within this new regime and within the increasing regulations that they have now from the Financial Conduct

Authority (FCA), and that they continue to do the excellent work that they have done for over 50 years in Northern Ireland. Beyond that, we have no problems. I have spoken to the Irish League of Credit Unions, which does not appear to have any problem with the legislation. So it is quite a good day, and everybody agrees.

Mr Flanagan: Cuirim fáilte roimh an bhille seo. I welcome the progress on the Bill, which has been under consideration for a number of years by the House, even during a previous mandate. It is strange for me to say this in the week that the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) is holding its biennial conference in Cork, but it is good to see that the Minister has crossed the picket line and come back to perform his ministerial duties. I know that there is a genuine willingness among some members of the DUP to continue with the legislative process that is in train here, and this is the second opportunity that the House has had to debate the Bill's Second Stage. It is good that there has not been a false start today and that we are seeing progress being made with the legislation, because, for too long, credit unions have been campaigning for this change but have been given much false hope. Hopefully, the passage of the legislation, which seems to have support right around the House today, will improve the operations of credit unions across the North.

For many years, the credit unions and their members, of which I am one, have been crying out for the chance to expand their range of services. This is the first substantive piece of legislation that DETI has brought forward since 2011, and, in this instance, the manner in which the Department engaged with the Committee in pre-legislative scrutiny really worked well. It allowed Committee members to get an in-depth understanding of the issues facing the credit union movement and of the proposals being brought forward by the Department. This is a highly complex issue. We are not only dealing with legislation in the House but with the historic transfer of regulatory powers away from here to the FSA in London. That adds additional complexities, so pre-legislative scrutiny gave Committee members a good understanding of the issues involved and a chance to engage with the credit union movement and departmental officials, as well as a chance to engage with those in London who are involved in regulating the credit union movement in order that we might grasp the changes that need to take place here to allow us to make sure that the legislation is all-encompassing and deals with all the issues on the table. The pre-legislative scrutiny approach worked well, and

that is something that Departments need to do with future legislation, instead of amendments being thrown in at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage that have not been considered by MLAs, the relevant Committee or wider society. I commend the Department, the Minister and his predecessor for taking that approach.

As has been said, the Bill makes provision for updates to the key legislation that governs the operation of credit unions, as well as industrial and provident societies, but most of my comments will deal with the issues facing credit unions. The Bill and recent changes have all been about bringing credit unions on to a par with banks, and one of the reasons for that has been the complete lack of trust that very many people in our society have with large multinational financial institutions. People are turning away from banks in significant numbers and towards credit unions, largely because credit unions are owned by local people — their members — and run in the interests of their membership. Credit unions have a unique reach into local communities and, for that reason, are very highly trusted by people from those communities. That is very well reflected when you compare the proportion of people here who are active members of a credit union with that in Britain, which has a completely different system and where the numbers of people who are engaged in credit unions and have active accounts is much lower than they are here.

The credit union sector on this island plays a critical role in economic development. Locally, that was probably best recognised in 2009 through the report on the Committee's inquiry into the role and potential of credit unions, in which the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee made a number of key recommendations on the future of the sector. It has been accepted for a considerable time that legislative changes will be required to allow those recommendations to proceed. Therefore, here we are, six years later, with those legislative changes being proposed. Six years is a long time, but, between 2009 and 2015, considerable work was done by the Department and others to bring us to the stage at which we could bring in primary legislation to update existing legislation covering credit unions.

11.15 am

In my opinion, the credit union movement has the potential to ease the pressure on the local economy. Given the current state of the banking sector and its low approval rate for loans and mortgages, as well as a complete

reluctance to offer people short-term overdrafts to meet unexpected pressures, the removal of existing barriers to credit unions and allowing them to offer those services is a very welcome step. It is something that will make a real and significant difference to the way that local communities bank and that will ease the financial burden on many.

In an age when it is becoming more and more difficult to make day-to-day financial transactions without the use of a bank account, I believe that restrictions on credit unions offering a wider range of financial services, including mortgages and electronic banking, to meet the changing needs of their customers should be removed. Those barriers need to be done away with, and that is one of the key purposes of the legislation. In the present financial climate, it is imperative that people have access to the most competitive rates that are available for saving and borrowing.

As I have said, credit unions are community-based, and the added income from the expanded services they should be able to offer could be invested in the local or social economy for the benefit of the community to which the credit union belongs. That is the fundamental difference between the credit union movement and banks. The banks want to take as much profit as they can from people and siphon it off for their shareholders. The credit union movement is owned by people who do not financially benefit more than any other members in it. Any profit or surplus that the credit union movement makes is either returned back to its membership or returned and invested into the local economy.

The credit union movement, as has been said, was introduced to Ireland in the 1960s by community activists across the island concerned at the disadvantage experienced by working-class people in accessing credit. The credit union movement emerged because many working-class communities were in the grip of moneylenders and did not have the financial collateral required by banks as security against borrowings. That same situation still prevails today. Credit unions can offer a cost-effective solution to the scandalous offerings of payday lenders and loan sharks. The same motivation that was used to establish the credit union movement should now be applied to inject momentum into the local economy and to help people who are in financial distress but also to offer a lifeline to SMEs, the social economy and community and voluntary organisations, which, once the legislation is passed, will be able to use credit unions for the first time.

Since the early 1960s, credit unions have provided accessible finance for families and individuals and would, if properly empowered through the legislation, be able to provide a lifeline to SMEs and local economies in the present context. They could also provide much-needed investment in social economy projects that would help impoverished communities. In the present economic downturn, government focus seems to be on protecting the interests of the large financial institutions, with little regard for those who are involved in community projects. Until now, little attention has been given to assisting those most directly affected by the historic financial situation that we are facing. Those are SMEs and the workers whose labour makes a direct contribution to the economic prosperity that was squandered by developers, speculators and banks over recent years. It is clear that credit unions can plug the gap in the difficulty in accessing finance that exists, as there are fewer constraints for members seeking to borrow money against their own savings or shares.

This legislative opportunity is also being used to implement legislative changes for industrial and provident societies (IPS). The Bill updates two pieces of legislation that govern the operation of credit unions and IPS respectively. Furthermore, the Bill will give credit unions and IPS greater operational flexibility while seeking to ensure that that flexibility does not put at risk the prudential running of such organisations.

The big plus side of the Bill, which the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions warmly welcome, is that for the first time it will allow credit unions to offer membership to corporate bodies, partnerships and community and voluntary organisations. That is a significant opportunity for all those bodies, as well as for credit unions, to expand their customer base. As someone who previously ran a business and is now heavily involved in a number of community and voluntary organisations, I know that there is certainly a demand among those organisations to avail themselves of the services of a credit union, which is owned and operated in the interests of its members.

As some other Members have said, I have some concerns about the implications of clause 1 and the fact that an account cannot be held in the name of an organisation but must be held in the name of an individual. I think that Trevor, despite not having access to the papers coming through the Committee, is largely across those issues when he talks about the potential for fraud within organisations, given that accounts

are going to be held in the name of a single individual, as opposed to the safeguards that would be in place if it was done through the name of an organisation.

That issue is the one remaining bone of contention for both credit union organisations. They want to see change. In the interests of getting the legislation passed and into statute, they are content for it to proceed as it is, but they really want to see a solution where corporate bodies, community and voluntary organisations and sporting clubs can open accounts in the name of those organisations as opposed to the name of an individual. That is something that we need to continue to explore. We are at only the Second Stage of the Bill; there is still a Committee Stage and a Consideration Stage to go through yet. With some creative and imaginative thinking, we can come up with a solution whereby accounts could be held in the names of organisations as opposed to individuals.

If we do not find a solution to that problem, organisations will be reluctant to move their accounts from banks to credit unions. An account held in the name of an organisation in a bank holds much greater weight than an account held in a credit union in the name of an individual. When a business, particularly a small business, is paying bills and is using a cheque with the name of an individual on the account, as opposed to a bank cheque account with the name of the business, there may well be some questions about the sincerity or status of that business. In terms of how we support our local business community and credit unions, I encourage members of the Committee, the Department and the Minister to find a solution that allows accounts to be held in the name of the organisation instead of just the name of an individual. At the end of the day, if that service can be offered by banks, and the whole purpose of this legislation is to put credit unions on a par with the banks, that is a solution that we need to find.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Member for giving way. Did the Committee or the Member have the same reservations about the reference to partnerships and the fact that the account would have to be held in the name of one partner? It is really the same thing.

Mr Flanagan: You are right, Trevor: it is the same issue. It is now open to partnerships, but the account has to be in the name of one individual, which does not really make sense. It does not make it a partnership, because it seems that one person has more access to the

account than others. These are the types of issues that need to be sorted out. The Committee has engaged with people in England who provide advice to the Department on this. It is clear that there are no legislative barriers to making that change. If the Assembly wanted to introduce a change around offering or allowing membership bodies or corporate bodies or partnerships to hold accounts in their name, that is within the legislative competence of the House.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way again?

Mr Flanagan: I will.

Mr Lunn: Maybe the Member can advise me of the situation in the Republic. Do they have a different approach?

Mr Flanagan: I do not know off the top of my head, Trevor. Perhaps the Minister will address the difference in credit union organisations, North and South, when he makes his closing remarks. Maybe somebody will get him the answer if I keep going for longer, but I assure you, Trevor, that I am nearly finished.

One of the issues that has been presented to us is the outworkings of the financial services compensation scheme. There is a claim that, if a credit union fails, compensation will not be paid to an unincorporated body because such a body does not exist in law. It is claimed that, if an organisation wanted to get a payment, that could happen only if the account is held in the name of an individual. One of the issues that needs to be sorted out at Committee Stage is whether that is actually the case and how we can find a creative solution to that problem. Whilst we are all in favour of an amendment to clause 1 to allow membership bodies, partnerships or corporate organisations to hold accounts in the name of their company, nobody wants a situation where, if a credit union fails, they will not be entitled to get their savings back, like other bodies would.

There exists a problem. A solution is not going to be straightforward, but, if a bit of work were done, we could find something. It is something that I want to see teased out a bit further. I encourage the Committee to explore it. I do not know whether a review in two years is sufficient, but, at this stage, if that is the best that the Committee and Assembly can do to make sure that the Bill passes and that there is some future way of trying to solve the problem, it is something that I fully support.

I commend the Bill to the House. I thank the Minister for bringing it forward and wish it well as it passes through its later stages.

Mr McKinney: Well, well. Here we go again. We are in a perilous economic state, our economy is broken, and that is reflected in our economically inactive population. The Enterprise Minister needs to be doing a raft of things, but he has not been doing them. Instead, he has vacated his seat, just like his ministerial colleagues, and abandoned the people of Northern Ireland. He should be embarrassed, and I am embarrassed for him.

Mr Bell: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. When political points are made that are outside the context of this debate, do I have your permission to respond to them in addition to replying to the debate?

Mr Speaker: I assure you and everybody in the House that you will all receive equal treatment from the Speaker.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Speaker. During the latter part of this comment, I was going to invite the Minister to intervene to try to justify his inaction, if he could, but I suspect that would have been in vain. He should be embarrassed, and I am embarrassed for him. If any ministerial position needs to reflect to the world that we are open for business, it is the economic brief. How can you do business when the chief executive officer is not in the boardroom?

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this very important Second Stage debate on the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill, and I do so as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. As has been reflected in contributions from the Floor, we have an exceptionally strong credit union movement here, with over 400,000 members. Of course, the aims of the credit union movement are close to the hearts of our society, and the credit unions exist only to serve their members and not to profit from their needs. That practice is as necessary now, potentially even more so, as it was when Ireland's greatest, John Hume, assisted in founding the Irish credit union movement and the Northern Irish credit unions.

We all know the value that the credit union movement, North and South, has brought to many tens of thousands of people. It is a trusted service that is embedded in and serves the community. That is in sharp contrast to some of the organisations that prey on those

who find themselves in need with extortionate interest rates. That has been reflected by my colleague the Committee Chair, Patsy McGlone.

Credit unions can also play a part in filling the gap that has been caused by the closure of bank branches across much of the North. In an area close to my office in my constituency of South Belfast, three banks have closed. If you go through any area now, you will not be far from a bank closure. Lots of my constituents have come to the office, including many who are older and do not have access to computers and online banking. They now find themselves potentially considerable distances from the banks that served them for years, and that is in an urban environment. Clearly —

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. There has been considerable investment by the Government in England and Wales to update and upgrade some of the facilities of the credit union movements there. I am sure that we would support the Assembly facilitating or helping with that change for our local credit unions.

Mr McKinney: I understand that the credit unions would be keen to see that type of investment. When a bank has fled the scene, we need to facilitate those that would take up the strain. Credit unions are ably placed to do that.

The credit union brand is integral to Northern Irish and Irish society, but times change, and it is imperative that this important work is able to continue to allow credit unions to compete in today's market. As we have heard, the Bill seeks to amend two pieces of existing legislation. Perhaps the biggest change is in relation to clause 1, which my colleague on the Committee, Phil Flanagan —

Mr Flanagan: Former colleague.

Mr McKinney: Sorry, Phil; you have just left the Committee. He is my former colleague. We have heard recommendations from the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions to amend that clause to allow for parity of treatment. In essence, they feel that, if banks are allowed to open accounts in the names of organisations, so should the credit unions. The SDLP backs that approach.

11.30 am

As we heard, Mr Speaker, there are 13 clauses in total. Some of the issues have been rehearsed. You can hear that there is not much dissent, but we need some further scrutiny. Further improvements can be made as the Bill progresses through the next stages in Committee and in the Assembly. I look forward to participating earnestly in those discussions with colleagues so that we can shape the best legislative and financial platform for credit unions to work productively for society, as they have been doing for so many years.

Mr Dallat: I am pleased to take part in the debate. We have heard a little of the history of credit unions. Before I address the clauses, I remind Members that the credit union movement was founded in Germany in 1850 by two clergymen of the Reformed faith. The movement spread to Newfoundland, where fishermen adopted its principles so that they could buy their own boats. It gravitated to the United States, and, to correct Mr Flanagan, it came to Ireland in 1959.

Mr Flanagan: I was rounding up.

Mr Dallat: We need to be precise in all these things, and the Member is maybe justifying why he said the 1960s.

It is true that I first came into contact with the credit union movement in the 1960s when I met John Hume, not as a politician but as someone who was working to encourage the setting up of credit unions. My own credit union, of which I was the director and treasurer for 35 years, began in a suitcase and gravitated to a modern office fit for the president of Ireland to visit some years ago. My faith and confidence is in the credit union movement. I see the Bill as being an opportunity to bring the movement to a new stage in its development.

It would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the work of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its various names down through the years. Those people worked quietly, without a lot of public attention, to develop the credit unions that are so successful today. I acknowledge the work of the current Department and the Committee, which have taken the issue seriously. I hope against hope that the Bill will become law before the end of this mandate, because it is absolutely critical to a new set of challenges and circumstances that confront ordinary people.

When I joined the credit union, banks would not lend money to ordinary people. You had to live in a big house, have a farm, have collateral,

have title deeds and all sorts of things. Ironically, banks will give money to virtually anybody today without any security checks at all, which is why we have this awful problem of people being in terrible debt to loan sharks, payday lenders and all sorts of people.

I now come to the clauses. I immediately identify the move to reduce the age at which people can become directors from 18 to 16. The credit union movement's strength is its young people. It has gone into schools and has, with the cooperation of teachers and others, encouraged children, through their parents, to open accounts and, as they grow older, transfer those to adult accounts. That is important.

Increasing savings from £20,000 to £75,000 or £100,000 — I do not think that the figure is a big deal — is important. For many people today, £20,000 is not a lot of money. It is perhaps money that people have set aside for their funeral, for their partners after they depart this world and so on. I want that increase to happen.

Allowing clubs and societies to become corporate members may not seem important, but it is, because, for a lifetime, the credit union movement has worked alongside clubs and societies and partnered them in an unofficial way in many projects. My goodness, what a change it could make if, for example, clause 6 were to become law and allow credit unions to make surplus money available not only for charitable groups but for social, cultural and, perhaps, social enterprise projects.

I can foresee the availability of that money from the credit unions perhaps providing an opportunity to unlock other moneys from the Government and so on. Clause 6 acknowledges the very close relationship between the credit union movement and other organisations that, equally, sustain communities and help them to survive.

Someone referred to how government could help credit unions to develop by making available grants for improving their premises. I say to the Minister that there is another way in which government can help — it was done successfully in Britain a few years ago — and it is to make available grants to appoint field officers, because one of the big problems that we have is the lack of knowledge of and education on borrowing money. People simply do not know their consumer law. They respond to very enticing offers of loans, not realising that the interest rate could be as high as 3,000% or 4,000%. I believe that officers dedicated to

going out into communities, working-class housing estates and rural communities in order to encourage people to come together to embrace the credit movement would be a very powerful weapon in diverting people from other means of borrowing, which, in fact, are simply plunging them further and further into debt. I plead with the Minister to consider that seriously and to acknowledge that it was done in Britain, many years ago, to some effect.

In conclusion, there was a reference to our current difficulties. The credit union movement is a unifying force. While there may be two organisations representing the credit union movement in Northern Ireland — the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions — I can say with pride, as someone who was associated with the Irish League, that it gave the Ulster Federation a lot of help, in its infancy, to establish itself. At the end of the day, the principles enshrined in both organisations are exactly the same. They both identify the cooperative movement as an organisation that has been extremely powerful down through the years, from the days of the gombeen men, who, I suppose, held people to ransom in many, many ways. It would be remiss of me not to mention Pat "The Cope" Gallagher — that wonderful man in west Donegal who inspired the cooperative movement and, I think, in many ways became a foundation stone for encouraging people throughout Ireland to look seriously at the credit union as simply an extension of that.

Today is a modern, new place, and things have to change. I am aware that many credit unions have substantially more money in savings than in loans. Certainly, in bygone days, as treasurer, I struggled to find enough money to make loans available. That seems to have changed. We need to find out why so many credit unions have up to 50% more in savings than they have out in loans. That is where the field officers and education officers could play a vital role. It seems wrong that the credit unions have invested in banks, when, in fact, that money could be doing wonderful work out in the community, helping ordinary people, not simply to make ends meet but, as clause 6 indicates, by allowing them to become more involved in the wider community.

I think that, despite the background that we are in at the moment, this a good day for the Assembly. What we need to do now is ensure that the Bill becomes law before the end of this mandate so that the renaissance of one of the most wonderful organisations in this world, whether it be in Germany, where it began, Newfoundland, the United States, or here in

Ireland, can carry forward to the next stage and that people are given the law and the tools to bring it forward.

Mr Agnew: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of Bangor Credit Union.

I think that it is understandable that political points have been made in the context that we are in — indeed, it would almost seem strange to address today's debate without mentioning something of the political context. However, this is the second time that the Bill has been scheduled, and perhaps I would have prepared more for it had I been sure that it would be moved today, so there has been a degree of disrespect to the Assembly, yet what I would not do, and what I find regrettable, is the belittling somehow of this piece of legislation and, perhaps as a consequence, the perceived belittling of credit unions. They play a vital role in our communities. Whilst individually a credit union will not change the face of the Northern Ireland economy, I would argue that the many credit unions that we have are a bedrock for many local communities and their economies and serve them very well.

This is an important piece of legislation, and I welcome the fact that the Minister is here to move the Second Stage, as it gives hope that, should the talks be successful in bringing back a degree of normality to these institutions, this piece of legislation should be able to make it through its various stages in the course of this mandate.

I would like to put on record my praise of the work of credit unions, their staff and their volunteers. Credit unions are created by the community for the community. I believe that the Bill is the next step in the evolution of credit unions to ensure that they can modernise, adapt and indeed step in. The greater the success of credit unions, the harder it will be for loan sharks and payday lenders to prey on the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities. Strong credit unions and a strong credit union movement will be to the benefit of our society.

The role of credit unions very much contrasts with that of the banks. They have remained stable while banks were playing fast and loose with our money and were engaged in casino-style investment practices. Banks required a bailout while, at the top end, they were receiving inordinate salaries and bonuses. Credit unions were there, humble but sustainable, providing an alternative form of credit; one based on need, not greed and, as I

say, for the community, not for the wealth of individuals.

As a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, I look forward to the line-by-line scrutiny of the Bill. We have already started that process and taken briefings from the Irish League of Credit Unions and the Ulster Federation of Credit Unions. It is an important piece of work and, as will be apparent to the Minister, there is still a degree of concern about the legislation on corporate membership. I think that, with collaborative work between the two credit union bodies, the Committee and the Department, hopefully we can get consensus and get that part of the legislation right.

By and large, I support what is in front of us, I support the spirit and intent of it, and I look forward to its swift passage through the Assembly.

11.45 am

Mr McCallister: I begin by congratulating the Minister and welcoming him to his office. I think he is vastly superior to his predecessor, and, hopefully, his term of office will be slightly longer.

I was keen to contribute to the debate because I recognise the huge value of our credit unions throughout Northern Ireland, which colleagues have spoken about. Mr Dallat highlighted some of the history of the credit union movement. I think that its contribution has been immeasurable in getting people — who would not have had access in any other format — in and connected with saving, borrowing and managing money.

Mr Agnew was very critical of our banking sector, which, even from a business perspective, has looked very much like a fair-weather friend at times over the last number of years.

I just want to briefly comment on some bits. I welcome clause 9 on reducing the age from 18 to 16. I think that any engagement that gets people to think, register, and be involved in managing money, and face up to their responsibilities at a younger age, is a good thing. I am a huge believer in the need for people, even at a young age, to think about retirement, even though that seems to be many years off. We are at a stage now where we have to start thinking about these things at a much younger age.

I also welcome the fact that the share capital will rise from £20,000 to £100,000. That is

welcome, given that, as I think Mr Lunn pointed out, it has been in place for 24 years. For, in particular, capital-intensive sectors like agriculture, which is my background, this is very welcome, although, right enough, the price of milk is still stuck at 1980s prices. Perhaps we could see what we could do about that. It is welcome, and it can make a difference. When we look at some of the facts and figures around this, we see that when farmers pool significant sums of money in cooperatives they can reap benefits, maybe as much as £9 for every £1 contributed. That is a huge add-on value, and it has to be welcomed.

So, I am pleased to see the Bill. It will be interesting to listen to the Minister's response, particularly to the points raised by Mr Flanagan and others around the names; whether we use a corporate name or the names of individuals. As someone who was farming in a business partnership with two, or maybe three, names on an account, I ask why we could not do the same with credit unions. I hope that the Minister, in his response, will signal a willingness — he may well have a very good reason — to debate this issue and look at any possible amendments that he, the Committee or, indeed, individual Members of the House might bring forward.

This is a very real issue, and I do not want to see anything that in any way hamstring our credit unions. I want to see them being involved. I also want to see the need for people to very much face the sharp end of the market when having to go and borrow money being very much reduced. Mr Dallat talked about having more savings than borrowings. I want to see that changed round and us maximising the huge potential of credit unions. I want to see the asset base that they are sitting on being maximised for the good of our economy, whether it is in small businesses, individual social enterprises or whatever it happens to be for communities. Let us free up and unleash the potential of our credit unions.

The Bill is a good step along that way, and I look forward to its passage through the Assembly. I am very pleased to support it at its Second Reading.

Mr Bell: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. It is an important debate, and it is wider than the credit unions. I join with all the praise that has been given to the people who — often very selflessly and unselfishly — give of their time, energy and talents to their local communities. I had the privilege of growing up in a working-class community, and I know just how much the

credit unions mean. When I started my first job in health and social services I went to my local credit union, because I needed a car and could not afford the loans that were on offer. I turned to my local credit union at the Orange hall in Ballymacarrett, and it gave me a loan for my first car, which allowed me to undertake my professional duties in health and social services.

I know that my story is only one of thousands of stories where credit unions have been a lifeline in supporting communities, local businesses and individuals and in helping people into work and in keeping jobs when money was needed. Mr Dallat gave us a distinguished history of the credit unions. We want to pay tribute to all those individuals who brought us to the place where we are. The work that we have done in the House today and will do in future on the Bill will build on and improve the legacy that we were given and that we benefited from.

I want to pick up on a number of issues that were raised. I thank the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment — the Chair, Deputy Chair and members past and present who were part of this. We got involved in areas of confidentiality and trust and we shared a lot of information with the Committee, which was mutually respected. As a result of that, we have a Committee that has actively done its job in being a critical friend and has helped us get to the stage that we are at with this piece of legislation.

We raised the issue of why unincorporated associations, for example, sports clubs, could not hold an account in the name of the organisation. Members are right in their understanding that these accounts will have to be held in the name of an individual. That is because unincorporated associations — unlike companies, which are corporate — do not have a legal personality. This means that they cannot sue or, in turn, be sued. It could result in a potential risk to credit unions if these organisations were to default on their loans. It is for that key reason that the Bill provides that these accounts should be held in the name of an individual or individuals. It offers a level of protection for the credit union, as there is a direct connection with the borrower.

The Committee Chair also raised the issue of the changes that have been made to the running of credit unions. The majority of the proposals are voluntary, so individual credit unions are free to decide whether to undertake the changes. The FCA and the Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) have indicated that a revision of the credit unions new sourcebook

(CREDS) manual for credit unions across the UK is likely in the near future. I understand that that will include a reference to credit unions in Northern Ireland. Many of the changes are similar to those that are currently operating in GB and the regulatory authority is, therefore, well-versed in these areas of change and will provide the regulatory advice when it is approached.

I want to clarify something around clause 10 of the Bill, which Mr McGlone raised in terms of CREDS reform.

CREDS refers only to credit unions, and clause 10 refers only to IPSs. CREDS is not a transferred matter and is outside the scope of my Department and the Assembly.

Mr Lunn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: I said to Members that the Bill will now go forward. I want to talk about the points that Members have raised, so I will not get into an interaction at this time.

A number of Members mentioned the political situation in Northern Ireland. I join those Members who are hoping for a successful outcome to the talks, but I will spend a minute responding to the many minutes of criticism. Shamefully, nobody mentioned the murder of Kevin McGuigan when those criticisms were made. Those who think that citizens can be murdered on the streets and that, with the PSNI assessment, we can carry on with business as usual are deluding themselves and not serving the interests of jobs and employment in Northern Ireland.

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: We cannot allow business as usual in any situation. There were responses to how we would respond to that. The Member who seeks to speak now, but who will not, originally raised the question. We discussed it with your party leader, who was on the same page as us before he took it to your party membership. That is the embarrassment of the situation.

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: We spoke to the Ulster Unionist Party about there being business as usual, and it chose to do business as usual with Sinn Féin and not respond, and that is why we took our decision not to do business as usual.

As part of the talks team, I can assure Members that we are working extremely hard to resolve

those matters. Northern Ireland is potentially in a very good place. I am looking at unemployment figures of 6.5%. Unemployment in Ireland is 9.9%. The European Union average is 9.6%. When we benchmark, our figure is almost a third lower. I am dealing with companies and, in the weeks to come, hope that announcements will be made about literally hundreds of new jobs for Northern Ireland. I believe that, if we can, during the talks process, resolve the outstanding issues of welfare reform and set a date and rate for corporation tax, Northern Ireland is in for a significantly positive future. I wish the talks every success.

Mr Flanagan raised the issue of corporate bodies in clause 1, and I have answered his question. He also talked about the Republic of Ireland. I have no responsibility for the Republic of Ireland and perhaps do not intend ever to have, but I understand that its legislation creates a legal personality for unincorporated associations. There is still an administrative process to establish legal recourse, and it is not clear to me that that would be more advantageous than the current drafting before us. It was considered by DETI and deemed inappropriate. If members want to raise it with my officials at Committee Stage, they are welcome to do so, and we will take things forward.

Every Member has made a very helpful contribution to the Bill. As has been said, it is a good piece of work. I think that it will help us deliver for the most disadvantaged in our society, and delivering something of value to those who need it most is what should motivate everybody in the House. That is what devolution should be all about.

Mr McCallister raised a point about milk prices. We are acutely aware of that. I have hosted a number of dinners with potential buyers from our dairy sector from right across the world, including the Middle East, and we have been exploring new markets with them. Without breaching the confidences of those individual businesses, I understand that, as a result of that work, new orders worth hundreds of thousands of pounds have come into the dairy sector. We will continue with that work.

I recognise the importance of having a growing and thriving mutuals sector. The Bill will give greater operational freedom to credit unions and to the industrial and provident societies. It will remove barriers and help them reach out to new customers and embrace new markets. Therefore, I commend this legislation to the House.

12.00 noon

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill [NIA Bill 56/11-16] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Credit Unions and Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Insolvency (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment).]

Mr Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Insolvency (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded, and the Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Private Rental Sector

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

Mr F McCann: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes its concerns at the continued growth of the unregulated private rented sector, which is the biggest provider of socially rented accommodation, a sector that receives tens of millions of pounds in housing benefit but still has little legislation or regulation; calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the role of the private rented sector in the provision of social rented accommodation to ensure it is fit for purpose; and further calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce measures to regulate this sector.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I ask Members to support the motion, which highlights the serious problems that exist in the private rented sector across the North. The motion speaks of concerns at the continued growth in the private rented sector to the position of being the biggest supplier of socially rented accommodation in the North. It also highlights the fact that this unregulated sector receives upwards of £300 million in housing benefit annually. It also calls on the Minister to move ahead with the promised review of the private rented sector that he announced on 6 November 2014.

This is too important an issue not to have the Minister's full input into its outworkings. In his statement, he spoke of the need to deal with this growing sector. He spoke of regulation being required, but where has this gone in the past year? I just noticed this morning that a briefing is scheduled for 10 December. Again, that puts this whole issue on the long finger. It would have been much better if the Minister had come here this morning and taken part in the debate to bring us up to date and tell us where he is going with this important issue. We need action to give confidence to a growing number of people who are being directed towards this sector. In 2006, there were 65,300 houses in the private rented sector. This has increased to over 130,000 in 2014. I tabled a motion back in 2007 calling on the then Minister to implement the registration scheme, which

was supported by the Assembly. In fact, it was the first of two motions on the subject. The second was defeated by those who believed that the market should control this sector. Look where that got us.

Sinn Féin has always argued for robust legislative change to bring the private rented sector into line with other housing providers. Other parties opted for a light-touch approach to the sector. The introduction of the landlord registration scheme, which had the final date of February 2015 to register, still has a way to go for full registration. It would be interesting to find out what action has been taken to penalise landlords who have ignored the deadline. It is my understanding that, by 20 March, 39,000 landlords had registered. They provided details of 85,000 private tenancies; a shortfall of thousands, given that there are an estimated 130,000 tenancies, or over 17% of all households. A similar approach has been adopted to the protection of tenancy deposits. I understand that many thousands of landlords have joined the scheme, depositing millions of pounds, but, again, many thousands have ignored the scheme. We need to be told what action is being taken to deal with the landlords who ignore these pieces of legislation. How many have been brought to court, and what has been the outcome of those actions?

We still have people coming to our advice centres who had paid deposits on properties but had them withheld on leaving.

A, chairde, there are many in the private rented sector who provide high-quality, decent houses for their tenants. Without them, the housing crisis would be much worse. I recently met people from the private rented sector to talk about problems in my West Belfast constituency and was impressed by the measures that they have taken to deal with antisocial behaviour. They informed me that they have over 5,000 homes on their books, both as landlord in their own right and as an agent, which is more than most housing associations. In fact, I will be meeting a representative from the Landlords Association tomorrow to discuss some of the serious problems faced by my constituents including conditions, misuse and sale of drugs, all-night parties, attacks and intimidation from their neighbours. I also wish to speak about how —

Mr Speaker: Fra, I ask you to move the microphone forward so that you are speaking into it. Hansard is struggling to keep up with your delivery.

Mr F McCann: OK; sorry about that, Mr Speaker.

I also wish to speak about how they can ensure that their members liaise with local elected representatives and community representatives to make their communities a better place to live.

The very good landlords who provide good accommodation and have invested in their stock need encouragement and help to deal with the problems and difficulties that they face. There are many who would welcome dialogue to deal with these issues. However, there are also many who provide poor housing and have little concern for their tenants' safety and welfare. In fact, many of the tenants who I have spoken to over the years only tolerate the conditions and abuse because, otherwise, they would be on the street with nowhere to go.

The payment of hundreds of millions of pounds to any other sector, Department or statutory body would not be tolerated. The fact that this sector is unregulated makes matters worse. We have all heard how community and voluntary sector organisations are hounded over small grants that they receive. They are heavily audited for amounts of several thousand pounds. Yet, here we have a sector that has only recently been compelled to register its properties and had to be forced into protecting tenants' deposits, which had been badly abused by many landlords and housing agents.

This is an issue that I have raised in the Chamber before. It is an issue that I have said needs to be reviewed. I believe that the Minister was serious about moving on a root-and-branch review of this sector, but time is rolling on, and still nothing has come to the Committee. That gives me no hope that this issue will be sorted out anytime soon. It sends out all the wrong messages to those who live in this sector. More than 130,000 units of accommodation are socially rented in this sector, which is more than the Housing Executive and housing associations combined.

From 2011, local councils carried out more than 15,000 inspections of private rental properties across the North. About two fifths of these inspections resulted in notices being issued, with nuisance abatement or public health notices making up the majority — more than 5,400. These notices were issued because disrepair was deemed to be causing conditions that are bad for health, such as damp and dry rot. Under the law, private rental properties must meet the basic minimum fitness standards such as ensuring that a property is structurally stable, has adequate lighting, heating and

ventilation, and is free from damp that could damage health. Many socially rented houses cannot even reach these low standards.

It is a fact that the sector remains, by and large, unregulated. There are those in the sector who just see the house that they provide as a moneymaker and have little concern for the person who lives in poor conditions. There are still those who do not provide rent books or tenancy agreements. There are still those who provide poor accommodation and threaten the tenant with eviction for asking for repairs to be carried out. There are still those who ignore all requests by their tenants for help, and there are still those who will intimidate and evict a person without any fear of consequences.

Some in the disability sector have said that they would like the option to go into the private rented sector because the accommodation would be conveniently close to family or carers, but the vast majority of private rented accommodation is not disabled friendly. In fact, this sector has an atrocious record of provision of housing suitable for people with disabilities. We had the opportunity to deal with this in some of the previous legislation but failed to do so. We need to grasp the nettle now and deal with this sector as soon as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: The SDLP is supportive of the motion and better regulation of landlords. I declare an interest as a landlord, although not in the social rented sector at the moment. Mr McCann outlined very real problems facing his constituents, and I suggest that there are difficulties facing constituents right across the North. Each of our constituency offices has had to enlist the support of the local authority to enforce what limited legislation is available to ensure that houses are fit for purpose. I have had to get environmental health or, indeed, building control out more than once, but he is right in saying that there is very limited regulation.

Many young people are returning to university, and students in particular are having to rent houses that are quite often lacking in fitness for habitation and many of the resources that they would find in a family home. Therefore, the need for regulation has been on the table for a very long time and, as Mr McCann said, it is most regrettable that, again, the Minister is not in his place because not only is there increasing concern about growth in the unregulated private sector but there is a dearth of proper accommodation for families and, in particular, people with disabilities. The list for disabled persons' facilities and the delay in the provision of grants is ever increasing.

I heard the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment refer to how the DUP was holding out for better deals and right government, but I think their in-out, hokey-cokey position on ministerial positions has backfired on them. That is certainly the mood of the public, and many of that party's own members feel very uneasy about it. So, yet again, I prevail upon the DUP to get its Ministers back in post. People are angry and fed up, and much work is required to be done.

In his contribution, Mr McCann also referred to the many good landlords. It is fair to say that there is an association of private landlords that highlights for the rest of us and for themselves some of the glaring deficits in the lack of regulation of the sector. For example, the regulation of the deposit scheme has not gone far enough. There are concerns around some letting agents and what they say and do to potential tenants. Mr McCann tried to suggest that other parties were not as keen on regulation and wanted a light touch. I do not think that is the case. I think that our previous Ministers had introduced better regulation around the landlord scheme and better conditions, and indeed were the most successful Ministers in tackling the social sector and the need for families and individuals requiring proper and good affordable housing.

One of the concerns that I would like to raise during my contribution is the issue of the affordable warmth scheme. The landlord, through the tenant, if it is in the social rented sector, can apply to the warm homes scheme, but they do not have the level of surety that, once the home is upgraded, their tenancy is secure. We would like to see better regulation and guarantees around that to protect tenants when there is an investment out of the public purse on the property. I think that that should be reflected in some security of tenancy for the occupants.

This is something that we have said time and time again. We all know many of the difficulties facing people in the community. It crosses our constituency desks, yet we have an almost empty Chamber and at least a third of our ministerial team is not at work today. That is something that the public are, quite rightly, angry about, and we should prevail upon the DUP in particular to get back to work right away.

12.15 pm

Mr Beggs: Let me first declare an interest: I have a son and a daughter who are students and rent property. My eldest son, who has

started employment, is also renting, and my dad lets a property.

The motion calls for a review of the private rented social housing sector. I find it strange that it calls for a review, when, I understand, one is already under way. The Minister announced it almost a year ago. I agree, however, that the review needs to come to a conclusion. Surveys and documents have been produced, but no decisions have been taken as yet on how to move forward. Those rest with the Minister, whose seat is vacant. However, I generally support the motion.

The landlord registration scheme has started the process of identifying landlords. All landlords must register, and I agree that it is important that we take the community with us and minimise legislation and cost. We must regulate only when necessary and when it can make a difference.

I support the informative process that has commenced for landlords, which should benefit tenants. Landlords need to be aware of their responsibilities. It is better that tenants' needs are looked after by landlords than their having to resort to the law when there is failure and lack of understanding. It is good that good practice advice is passed out through news-sheets to the landlords who have registered, but many landlords still need to register. A basic tenancy statement is needed. The tenancy deposit scheme must run smoothly to make sure that tenants' deposits are protected. Given the danger of carbon monoxide poisoning, annual gas safety checks are needed.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes, I will.

Mr F McCann: I appreciate what you are saying. However, if you cast your mind back to last week's meeting, when the issue of private landlords arose, it was one of the issues that gelled everybody. Stewart questioned the witnesses at length. Any time that the issue has come up, people have talked about minimal legislation. Rather than grasping the nettle and bringing in strong legislation to bring us into line with other housing providers, we are missing a beat and putting the issue on the long finger.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute, although Fra nearly used it up on you.

Mr Beggs: The Member should allow me to develop my thinking.

It is also right that we recognise the constructive role of the Housing Rights Service, which plays an essential role for tenants who have difficulty with their landlord. It is a vital service. Moving house is traumatic for all of us at the best of times, but, for people who have the roof over their head threatened, it is vital that they have good help and advice. I commend the Housing Rights Service for its knowledge and the advice that it has given to me and my constituents.

I recognise that the private rental sector provides an important option for many. For some, the private rental sector prevents homelessness due to the long Northern Ireland Housing Executive waiting list. We need to be careful what we do. As an Assembly, we do not have the funds to build sufficient public housing, so we must work with the private sector. There are a huge number of rentals out there; some 17% of homes are now in the private rental sector. There must be a balance between the rights of landlords and those of tenants. As others said, we have some very good landlords, who are to be commended, but we also have some very bad ones, who may fail to carry out necessary repairs. In my constituency, I can think of one person who had difficulty in getting a leaky roof fixed and someone else who had difficulty getting the landlord to prevent birds from entering the roof space, which was annoying the tenants and could have health implications.

I support the decision to move forward the legislation on houses in multiple occupation. I agree that there are higher risks, and it is right that we do that. It is also interesting that about 60% of private landlords are paid from public funds, so there is clearly a public interest in ensuring that they deliver. Some 8% of tenants are dissatisfied with the services provided by their landlord, and 14% are dissatisfied with repairs. Improvement is needed. We also need to ensure that everyone has a tenancy agreement — only two thirds have one at present — and that an energy performance certificate is provided when a tenancy changes. Improvement in the system is clearly needed.

The survey also revealed that many landlords were temporary landlords. Perhaps they had wanted to sell their houses but were unable to do so following the property crash and became reluctant landlords. It is important that we move forward carefully. We do not want them simply to take those rental properties off the market and create even greater stress. Clearly, there needs to be movement going forward to address those who are failing tenants.

Landlords should complete repairs in a timely fashion and meet the needs of tenants. Assessments of whether they do so and some sort of accreditation for landlords would be appropriate. We should also consider other areas for regulation. Perhaps there is a need to have electrical surveys every so often. I believe that this is an area in which regulation is needed, but we must go forward carefully.

Mr Dickson: It would be remiss of me not to refer, as others have, to the party-before-people absent Minister — the lack of a Minister in the House today. Once again, an important debate is taking place. We are talking about people's homes, where people live and raise their children and where people with disabilities live, yet we have a Minister who is not prepared to join in that debate with us. I find that as shameful as the absence of the Health Minister during the crisis that people face in hospitals today.

I particularly thank those who brought the debate to the Chamber, because this is, as others have said, an important issue facing many of our constituents, including mine, and yet it does not receive a great deal of public attention. We are experiencing a crisis in housing provision, and hardly a day goes by when my office does not assist people who are desperate to access social housing. Every day, we see that there is a critical shortage of the right kind of homes for people, and, quite sadly, often the only solution is to point them towards the unregulated or virtually unregulated private rented sector. I do that with a heavy heart because I know the other side of that coin. I know what it is like to visit, with an environmental health officer, some of the most difficult properties that I have ever seen families forced to live in.

On a brighter note, I also commend the work of the Housing Rights Service, particularly the advice and guidance that they give to tenants in the private rented sector on issues of rent and rent control in particular. I can cite examples from my constituency of people clearly benefiting from advice given to them by the Housing Rights Service.

We have regulation in social rented accommodation, but we need to move to a much higher standard of regulation in the private rented sector. The key to solving the problem is, of course, building more social housing. Things are very different from the 1960s and 1970s, when we had a major building programme, and, of course, the Housing Executive and its predecessors made an amazing contribution to social housing in

Northern Ireland. We also need smaller homes for today's needs, especially one-bedroom homes for our many elderly people, given the drive towards care in the community, the context in which that is happening and the pressure that it puts on social housing and, indeed, the whole housing market here in Northern Ireland.

We need to be cognisant of the fact that it looks as though the Tory Government intend to have a fire sale when it comes to further housing associations. I want to put down a very clear marker, although it might not be the content of today's debate, that, as far as I am concerned, that is a no-go area for us in Northern Ireland.

Of course, not all landlords conform to the stereotypical uncaring, unscrupulous *Rachmans* of this world. Many landlords provide decent homes in the private rented sector. However, I see the situation that many people live in, the rents that they are required to pay and the inadequate heating systems in their properties, all of which drives me to the clear conclusion that it is important that the Minister come forward with appropriate plans to deliver regulation in the private rented sector. That, for me, is most important. We should also not forget the non-social renter, those who are completely at the mercy of the private rental market. Regulation is lacking here, too.

I proposed an amendment to today's motion that was not accepted. It called for an extensive review of the whole private rental market, including letting agencies. Although the amendment was not selected for debate, I hope that the proposer of the motion will take account of that point. There is particularly an issue around letting agencies in that landlords are required to use only one letting agent. There is a strong argument for multiple letting agencies to be used to allow them to deliver in a particular community.

We are and the United Kingdom has been seen to be a nation of homeowners. However, that is becoming less the case. Many young people are simply unable to get into or are pushed out of the housing market. Renters and buy-to-lets have increased, to the detriment to those who wish to get their foot on the housing ladder.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Dickson: I commend the debate today and support the motion.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht

thábhachtach seo. I must admit that it is hard to wind up a debate that lasted for all of 25 or 30 minutes. I will make some comments of my own rather than respond to what a Minister has or has not said.

Like other Members, I declare an interest at the outset. However, unlike some other Members, I am not a landlord nor connected to them; I am a member of the private rented sector. Like very many people of my generation, we do not own our house. We do not live in social housing; we live in the private rented sector, so I know first-hand the difficulties that people living in the private rented sector face, and those pressures are growing.

The key issue before us today is the growth of the private rented sector, which remains unregulated despite considerable sums being paid to private landlords through housing benefit. It is my understanding that over £300 million a year is paid to landlords through housing benefit, yet those landlords are not subject to any regulation to make sure that their tenants are treated fairly.

There is no doubt that private landlords are needed and are here to stay, but the growth in recent times can be explained by many reasons. The reduced affordability of homes to buy over the past 10 years is a considerable barrier. If you link the average annual earnings of a family with the cost of buying a home, you will find that it is now less affordable for people in this generation to buy a home than at any time in the past. The unavailability and inaccessibility of mortgages since the crash also presents a barrier to people in buying their own house, but it also creates a barrier to the ability of developers and individuals to build additional homes, whether in a commercial sense or on their own land or in their own town or village.

The number of social houses that have been sold off over the past 20 years has put serious pressure on availability in the social housing sector. More and more houses are being transferred out of public and into private ownership but are not being replaced with new ones. That puts serious pressure on the local private rented sector, as supply is not increasing to meet demand.

The final nail in the coffin is the declining investment in social housing across the North. When you look at all these issues collectively, you see that they explain why there are so many problems in the rented sector. What we are looking for today is simple. We are not saying that landlords should not be allowed to

operate, and we are not saying that they should not be able to make a profit. We want to see the introduction of proper regulation of private landlords.

Many Members have said that there are good landlords: there are. I have lived in houses across the North that have been owned by very good landlords, where you could not have asked for more, but I have also lived in houses that have been owned by very bad landlords who treat their tenants with contempt. That happens particularly in student housing, where very little regard is given to the human rights of the people living in a house. They are treated like dirt and are seen as a cash cow by landlords, who use them to maximise the income that they can get. It is not good enough for us to stand back and allow that to happen, whether those people are students, young families or older people who, for one reason or another, have not bought their own house and cannot get into social housing because of how the points system works. There is not enough social housing to meet demand, and, in many areas, only those with a considerable number of points can be accepted.

12.30 pm

Some of the issues facing people living in the private rented sector are quite simple: there is legislation that states that landlords have to keep rent books, but I do not think that too many are complying with that; and legislation has been introduced to allow an external organisation to hold on to deposits, but I do not think that that has been enforced properly. These are areas where we have introduced legislation here but it is not being enforced properly, usually by the local authorities that have the responsibility for policing it.

Then you have landlords who think that, when they get a deposit from a tenant, it is money for nothing and it is for them. They do not seem to think that they have to hand the money back to the tenant at the end of the tenancy agreement if no damage has been done to the house. Landlords seem to think that it is their money and that they can hold on to it. The whole rationale for the introduction of the tenancy deposit scheme is to make sure that landlords do not hold on to deposits when they have no legal basis for doing so.

You also have the situation where tenants are living in horrendous circumstances. As Members like Roy Beggs said, they are not receiving fair treatment, and private landlords do not carry out repairs in a speedy fashion. It could be something as straightforward as fixing

a light, a broken shower or a blocked sewer. All these things are examples of where landlords are not quick enough in stepping up to the plate. I suppose there are criticisms that could also be thrown towards the Housing Executive, but that is a different matter.

I want to put on record a circumstance I had in the recent past with a previous landlord. When I was evicted from the property because of a change in the landlord's circumstances, numerous rules were broken. The landlord, completely, and flippantly, thought he could hold on to the deposit and tell me when to get out of the house, without providing written notice. The way in which landlords deal with their tenants is completely unacceptable. It is for that reason that organisations like Housing Rights and Citizens Advice Bureau are there to help people. I want to put on record my thanks to the Housing Rights service and to Fermanagh Citizens Advice Bureau, which helped me through a very difficult situation when I was trying to get a deposit back from a landlord. I actually had to go through the small claims court to get money back from a landlord who had no legal basis for holding on to the deposit. That is a situation that very many people face. Unfortunately, very many people are put off by the barriers that exist when trying to access independent advice or when going through the courts to get their money back. We need to see those barriers removed so that tenants can have their rights. We also need to see greater regulation, so that tenants are treated fairly by their landlords.

If you look at the difference between the situation in urban and rural areas, you will see that there is a complete absence of alternative accommodation in many towns and villages across the North. Therefore, if you are put out of your house because your landlord could not keep up with mortgage payments, or because they have changed their circumstances and want their son or daughter to move into the house, or because they have decided to sell the house because they are no longer in mortgage arrears and the price of the house has increased so that they can sell it off and clear the mortgage, you are faced with eviction through no fault of your own. Very often, there is no alternative accommodation for you and your young family in that area. Then, because there is no alternative accommodation, you are forced to move to another town or village and live somewhere else. The knock-on effect of that is that your children have to find alternative schooling arrangements. The fact that tenants can just be thrown out for no reason and with 30 days' notice is a huge barrier to people who

want to live in the private rented sector. Security of tenure just does not exist.

There is a unique culture in Ireland where people want to own their own houses, and that is a laudable target, but if you go to some other European countries, you will find that around 70% of the people live in the rented market. Most people accept that, once you die, you cannot take the house with you. Therefore, an awful lot of them are happy to live in rented accommodation, but all they want is to be treated fairly and to have security of tenure and to know that they are not going to be thrown out for no reason or simply on a whim. Those are the very serious issues that we are trying to address. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a huge pile of regard given to them by some people in the House.

On the whole, when you look at it, we are too reliant on the private rented sector. We need to get additional investment into our social houses, because we are now in a situation where the private rented sector is the dominant force in renting houses. For the first time ever, it has the monopoly. There are now more houses rented privately than are rented through the social housing structure. That is a situation that we need to change.

We need to get additional investment into our social housing scheme, because there is obviously money to be made from renting houses. If there was not money to be made, why would there be so many landlords doing it? The thing that I cannot understand is, if there is money to be made, why does the state not do it? Do it in a way that treats tenants fairly so that their rights are not abused, then use the surplus or profit that would be gained from renting out those properties to either reinvest in additional housebuilding to meet future demand or to retrofit existing and older properties. That seems to make sense to me, instead of just throwing it out to the private sector to do what it wants without any kind of regulation or safeguards for people who live in those houses.

The emphasis here, if you look at the media, is that increasing house prices is a good thing, but that is what got us into this problem. Elevating house prices were deemed to be a good thing. It might be a good thing for developers, speculators and financiers, but it is not a good thing for families or for society. It is certainly not a good thing for the rented sector, because many people are being priced out of it. We need to see additional regulation brought in to protect tenants and make sure that they are not treated unfairly by landlords.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes its concerns at the continued growth of the unregulated private rented sector, which is the biggest provider of socially rented accommodation, a sector that receives tens of millions of pounds in housing benefit but still has little legislation or regulation; calls on the Minister for Social Development to review the role of the private rented sector in the provision of social rented accommodation to ensure it is fit for purpose; and further calls on the Minister for Social Development to introduce measures to regulate this sector.

Autism

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

Mr D Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern over the waiting times for children for autism and special educational needs assessments; notes that 'The Prevalence of Autism (including Asperger's Syndrome) in School Age Children in Northern Ireland 2015' report, published in July 2015, shows that the estimated prevalence of autism has increased; recognises that delays in diagnosis are resulting in children with special educational needs being denied access to the extra educational support they need; further notes the importance of early intervention for educational and social development for these children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work collaboratively with the Minister of Education and his arm's-length bodies to invest fully in and streamline services to deal with the backlog.

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil an-áthas orm a bheith anseo inniu chun an rún seo a mholadh don Tionól. I am pleased to be in the position to propose the motion today. As you may know, for a long time I have been an advocate of good services for people with autism, both children and adults. I must say that the House has been responsive to the needs of people with autism and passed the Autism Act in 2010-11. I was, of course, very proud to have my name as sponsor of that Bill.

The Autism Act recognised autism not just as a health issue or an education issue but as a cross-departmental issue and also as a developmental disability. Since then we have had the autism strategy 2013-2020 and the accompanying action plan for 2013-16. The autism strategy is a cross-departmental strategy introduced by the Health Minister and addressing the whole-life needs of people, families and carers living with autism in Northern Ireland. The Act required the Health Minister to lead on the development, implementation, monitoring and reporting of the new strategy, with other Departments obliged to cooperate. Of course, the Minister of Health is responsible and accountable to the House for the implementation of the Act, so what a disappointment it is that the Health Minister is

not here today to respond to the various points made by those who will speak in the debate.

I am extremely concerned about the waiting times for special educational needs assessments. The motion calls on the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education to work together to ensure that waiting times for diagnosis, intervention and statementing are reduced. Under the present circumstances, with no Minister of Health in place, the backlog will only get worse.

There can be no doubt about it: autism and special educational needs are both on the radar of the Minister of Education. We have the current special educational needs legislation making its way through the House. ASD has been on previous Health Ministers' agendas, through the autism strategy and the autism plan, but, unfortunately, I cannot say the same of the present Minister of Health, who is not even in the House today.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Bill has many aims. It will place a duty on the Education Authority to request help from the health and social care trusts in all cases in which it considers that those bodies could help in the exercise of its functions. Very importantly, the Bill will contribute to the wider policy aim of reducing the time frame for the completion of statutory assessment and issue of a final statement by the authority from 26 weeks to 20 weeks. The then Minister of Health launched the autism strategy last year. Its aim is to ensure that all Departments work together to improve support for those living with autism. That is exactly what our motion is asking for: collaborative, joined-up working between those two Departments, which are required under the Autism Act to work together on the issue.

The motion refers 'The Prevalence of Autism (including Asperger's Syndrome) in School Age Children in Northern Ireland 2015'. That report has brought forward some thought-provoking figures. It has left us in no doubt that autism is more prevalent in society today than it was six years ago. In the past five years, the rate of autism has increased by 67% in school-age children, with one in 54 pupils attending school being diagnosed with ASD. The prevalence of autism has increased by nearly 1% between 2009-2010 and 2014-15, from 1.3% to 2.2%. In 2009-2010, there were 3,668 children with ASD out of a school-age population of 270,000. In 2014-15, there were 6,045 children with ASD out of a school population that had not increased very much. It is therefore very clear that the prevalence of autism is increasing in

our society, but that is not being accompanied by the necessary increase in support and services and the necessary decrease in waiting times for diagnosis and early intervention.

The report also highlights the fact that males are five times more likely to be identified as having ASD than females, although the number of females is rising. Although the report highlighted that and brought the numbers to our attention, we are still aware of the growing pressure of the number of children, young people and adults with autism and the challenge that that pressure places on already fragile autism services.

12.45 pm

There is no doubt that, without early and speedier diagnosis, children with ASD and special educational needs will not get the support that they require in school or through the health service. I cannot stress enough that one of the key aspects of ensuring that children with autism develop to their fullest potential is early intervention, early diagnosis and early statementing.

The current target for assessment is 13 weeks. At the end of April, 1,449 children were waiting for assessment; more than 900 had been waiting longer than the recommended 13 weeks. Of those, 476 had been waiting more than 26 weeks and more than 78 children had been waiting over a year to be assessed. Those are children who, if found to have ASD, will not have got the support that they required inside and outside school during the time that they spent waiting for a diagnosis to be completed.

In an answer to a question for oral answer that was asked by my colleague John Dallat in June this year, the Minister of Health stated:

"The Health and Social Care Board is working to reduce the number and length of time children and young people have to wait for ... assessment."

He said that autism services have been unable to keep pace with the growing demand. In 2010, there were approximately 1,500 referrals for autism services and that had nearly doubled to 2,936 by March 2015.

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

Mr D Bradley: The Minister finished his answer to that question by assuring the House that the Department was:

"working to seek to find new ways of reducing the impact of long waits for assessment."

Unfortunately, we have not seen those new ways come to fruition. Perhaps the call that will go out from the House today will —

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call Ms Maeve McLaughlin.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity, as a member of the Education Committee, to speak in this important debate. I acknowledge and thank the proposer of the motion for tabling it. It is very clear in highlighting the prevalence of autism and how it has increased, and rightly notes the importance of early intervention.

The motion calls on the Minister of Health:

"to work collaboratively with the Minister of Education and his arm's-length bodies to invest fully in and streamline services to deal with the backlog."

It is our view, however, that that needs to go much further. There needs to be a formal duty of cooperation between Health and Education to deal with special educational needs. Put frankly, there are too many gaps in the sharing of information between the two Departments that are impacting on children and families.

Clause 4 of the SEND Bill gives us an opportunity to do just that. It places a duty on the Education Authority to request help from health and social care bodies when it is considered necessary. It is my view that that needs to be much stronger and should, ultimately, place a formal duty on both Departments to cooperate. I say that because the majority of the delays in the statementing process lie at the door of the health and social care trusts.

During the quarter ending 30 June 2015, 682 children had been referred for an assessment for autism spectrum disorder. That was an increase of 18% on the previous quarter.

The estimated prevalence among school-aged children of autism, including Asperger's, increased by 67% across all health and social care trusts between 2008-09 and 2013-14. Indeed, the school census figures for 2014-15 found that 6,045 children were identified with ASD.

The proposer of the motion referred to the significant difference between genders, with males almost five times more likely than females to be identified with ASD. However, analysis has indicated that the female ASD population has increased in recent years at slightly higher rates than that of males. The same analysis shows us that the rate of ASD for the 10% most deprived areas stood at 2,818 cases per 100,000 of the population, a third higher than the so-called regional rate. On 31 March 2015, there were 1,383 children on waiting lists for a diagnosis of ASD — a stark reality for all of us. We are told that in 2008-09, £1.64 million recurrent funding was provided for children's autism services and that a further allocation of £250,000 was made in 2013-14.

The Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill reflects on the time limits to issue a final statement, but the stark fact remains that in 2013-14, 59% of statements were made after the statutory period of 26 weeks. That means that somewhere in the region of 1,317 children were waiting longer than the statutory time for an assessment. To back that up further, a 2010 survey found that only 14% of teachers believed that there was a coherent approach across Health and Education in supporting children with SEN.

I support the motion. It is right that we move to models of early intervention and diagnosis. However, we need to see better formal working relationships between Health and Education. In my view, that should be in the nature of a formal duty on both Departments to cooperate.

Mrs Overend (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I speak initially on behalf of the Education Committee as its vice-Chairman. I thank the Members who tabled the motion for debate. The subject matter coincides very much with the Committee's consideration of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill.

Members have highlighted the increasing demand for SEN support services in schools, the variation in those services across Northern Ireland and the apparent complexity of assessment and referral arrangements. Given all of that, it is therefore unsurprising that a relatively large number of assessments are taking place well beyond the statutory timescales. It is perhaps also unsurprising that most Members frequently face complaints in the constituency surgeries from frustrated parents who simply want to make sure that their child gets the support that they need at school.

During our consideration of the SEND Bill, the Committee received many explanations and assurances from the Department of Education, Education Authority and relevant Health arm's-length bodies. If these are to be accepted at face value, there is no problem — Health and Education are cooperating marvellously and at every possible opportunity; wonderful protocols are being developed; liaison groups are hitting their stride; and regional allied health professional services in support of SEN, if not always available are, according to officials, imminent. The Committee's problem is reconciling these departmental assertions with the reality experienced by our constituents. I believe that the Education Committee, in this regard, simply does not accept what it has been told by officials. Consequently, and in line with the Children's Services Co-operation Bill, members are thinking seriously about seeking to have new statutory obligations placed on arm's-length bodies to cooperate in the delivery of SEN services. Part of our consideration of those new obligations will be coloured by the success or otherwise of the Autism Act in improving access to education for children with ASD.

I will speak now as the Ulster Unionist spokesperson on education and a Mid Ulster MLA. In the last five weeks, since the beginning of the school term, I have been inundated with concerns from parents regarding the education provision for their children. On average, there are two to three a week, which is an astounding number. Their concern could be about a delay in the assessment of their children or whether they are receiving the right amount of educational assistance. School principals and teachers have also been highlighting to me their exasperation at the system. Often, they are told that they can refer only one or two children during the school year for assessment. Think about how that conversation would go; a school principal has to inform a parent that their child does not have as high a priority as another child in the school. What does that do for a staff/parent relationship? Surely that type of action puts a strain on such a relationship, causes bad feeling and, ultimately, could break down further educational achievement for that child. I wonder what the rationale is behind the decision to allow schools to refer only a limited number of children. The cynic in me says that it is to limit waiting lists in the system. I have no doubt that there is very good work ongoing by officials within the Education Authority, and I have talked to various educational psychologists who are working very hard, but there is much to be done to improve the situation.

I refer to figures that were revealed in October last year. The figures show that, as of the end of August last year, 105 children were waiting more than 13 weeks for an assessment in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. That is simply not good enough. More often than not, those assessments will find that a child has quite complex needs. It is already an anxious time for families who are worried about their children and keen to have as much detailed information as possible about their condition. Having to wait months for appointments only adds to the stress. An early diagnosis is essential to put in place the help and support that a child needs at home and at school. A diagnostic ASD assessment will give parents and teachers the information that they need to determine the level of support that a child will require, ensuring that they will not be at a disadvantage in the education system. It is vital that the trust takes actions.

In conclusion, the motion calls for cross-departmental collaboration, which is something that we have been calling for time and again. Frankly, the people of Northern Ireland deserve better.

Mr Speaker: Mr Kieran McCarthy will be the next Member to speak in the debate but, as the Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise the House that question 9 has been withdrawn.

Culture Night Belfast 2015

1. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of Culture Night Belfast 2015. (AQO 8794/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for her question. The various culture nights that took place on 18 September 2015 across the North were delivered by a mixture of private organisations and councils. My Department, through the Arts Council, made a funding contribution of £21,600 to the Cathedral Quarter Trust for Culture Night Belfast. It is too early to make an assessment of Culture Night 2015 across the North as definitive information is yet to be made available, but going by what the groups have said, the initial feedback and what I saw, the event in Belfast in particular was a huge success. Early estimates indicate that some 65,000 people attended events across Belfast. As I said, that is an early indication. The continued high attendance figures provide a convincing indicator of support for the local cultural scene right across Belfast and of the sector's potential to contribute to the development of a diverse and dynamic culture. Culture nights are now an integral part of the wide-ranging cultural offering supported by my Department, such as Belfast Pride in July, the Festival of Fools and the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, all of which continue to attract significant numbers of spectators and participants.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for her answer. The feedback across the media and from those of us who attended the events was that it was a very positive night. Did the Minister receive any correspondence on the potential lack of funding or reduced funding this year and the impact that it made? Will she therefore commit to continued funding in future years?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said in the primary answer, the numbers are early indications, but attracting 65,000 people to Belfast alone on 18 September is very impressive. I have received a lot of correspondence from groups right across arts and culture, particularly about funding. However, a lot of it is not just about funding cuts, it is about the availability of funding in future years. Some sectors are organised and are looking at collaboration between Belfast City Council and the tourism sector to ensure sustainability. I know that the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce recognises the economic impact of Culture Night and wants it to continue, and it is the same for chambers of commerce in other cities, towns and villages across the North. I am committed to ensuring that that happens.

Mr B McCrea: I want to follow up on Mrs Cochrane's question by asking about funding for Culture Night Belfast. The organisers tell me that it was possible to put on the show only because of funding from a large brewery, and I am not sure whether that is desirable. Did we increase or decrease the funding for culture and arts in Belfast?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly, Culture Night will have had its award already. All cultural festivals are encouraged to try to get additional sponsorship. Culture Night Belfast is very lucky to receive that sponsorship. The Member, as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure, will know of the work of Arts and Business, which helps to pair off businesses and sponsorships with cultural provision. It is important that that sponsorship continues. I know, even from talking to others, that they are having great difficulty. It is a conversation that we need to have, particularly with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and other Ministers, to ensure that this attraction helps local businesses and helps to generate the economy. It provides opportunities for people to look at new ways of ensuring security of funding for cultural packages, which everybody claims to reap the benefits of.

Casement Park: PAR Report Recommendations

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she will ensure the implementation of the 20 recommendations of the project assessment review report on Casement Park. (AQO 8795/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The independent project assessment review (PAR) report was published on 7 August

2015, and I intend to implement in full all 20 of its recommendations. Immediately following receipt of the report, I set about implementing the recommendations that were, for me, deemed critical. Ian Maye has now been appointed the new full-time, dedicated senior responsible officer for the regional stadia programme, and he took up his post on 1 September. Good progress has also been made in implementing the second critical recommendation, and that is the appointment of an independent chair of the safety technical group, which is expected to happen later this month or in early November.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for that response. Will she comment on the fact that the PAR report states that a new planning application for Casement will take up to 12 months to prepare? Is she content with that time frame?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, no, I am not content with that time frame. The PAR team looked at the maximum time that was allowed to implement the recommendations. I am aware, and I know from the report, that they interviewed many people regarding the Casement Park redevelopment. It certainly interviewed the Ulster Council and recognised the work that it has done thus far. However, I think that they are being very generous in their estimation that it will take up to an additional 12 months. I know that Casement is in the Member's constituency, and I hope that, very soon, the Ulster Council will bring forward its pre-consultation consultation to equip people who will feed into a consultation on a new planning application. I imagine that that will happen very soon.

Mr Rogers: We are very aware of what the GAA has contributed to society right across this land. Will the Minister tell me what action her Department is taking to ensure that the GAA has the right facilities to safeguard the longevity of the sport in an ever changing, modern society?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. First, I do not think that anybody can actually say that I have not given the GAA, and particularly the Ulster Council, my full support, even in very difficult times. I have to say that the fact that some of the Member's colleagues stood on picket lines for people outside Casement Park opposing the redevelopment was very disappointing. Certainly, I will not be found wanting in giving the Ulster Council the fullest support in order to ensure that the GAA

has fit-for-purpose facilities for the twenty-first century.

Mr Cochrane-Watson: Does the Minister not agree that the project assessment review is fatally flawed as it did not involve the Sports Grounds Safety Authority in a meaningful way about emergency exit planning for Casement Park?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly do not agree that the PAR report is fatally flawed at all. What I would say is that all relevant bodies were part of the PAR team's consultation. The people responsible for emergency exiting need to bring forward emergency exit plans as part of the consultation. That certainly needs to happen as part of any new planning application. I imagine that ongoing work with the Sports Grounds Safety Authority and many other people will continue as an application is progressed.

Belfast Central Library: Refurbishment

3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the refurbishment of Belfast central library, including any revised costs. (AQO 8796/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Senior officials in my Department recently approved an outline business case for the refurbishment of Belfast central library, subject to a number of final, technical issues that need to be addressed. The business case was prepared by Libraries and assesses the capacity of Belfast central library, in its current state, to provide efficient and effective services for the people of the local area, Belfast as a whole and the wider population. The business case also evaluates and costs options for the much-needed future development of the library.

The preparation of the business case and the process of approval have involved lengthy and detailed considerations in order to take account of the scale and complexity of the Belfast central library project. As part of that evaluation process, a casework committee, chaired by my permanent secretary, was established in July this year. It will review the documentation and look at the work on addressing issues arising from the final casework. My officials have just received a revised business case from Libraries and expect to complete their review of that within the coming days.

Mr G Kelly: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her

answers up to now. Can she give us any idea of whether there might be scope for sharing services with the local community and, indeed, the university, which is in the same area?

I understand that this is not just about built heritage and that there is a long history there. Its use by the community, once the work is done, is very important.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is yes. Belfast Central Library currently has a good working relationship with a lot of community groups. The library, and other libraries across the board, have exploited and have been encouraged to take every opportunity to have greater links with the community, particularly through the community and voluntary sector. It is a plus that Ulster University at York Road is expanding and that there will be an increase in students using that facility. I imagine that Belfast Central Library and the university will try to offer additional support for students. In the first instance, the work of the community and voluntary sector will continue, if not increase. I hope that the same will happen for the students of all ages using the university.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her previous answer. Belfast Central Library is the jewel in the crown as far as libraries are concerned here in Northern Ireland. I support the Minister in her business case and the progress that has been made. Given the fact that the business case is now almost complete, when does she estimate that this project can get off the ground and when will we see completion?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We are at the end of the technical and bureaucratic processes. I am glad that I took my time over this programme because even the estimated savings in the revised business case and business plan look to be almost £7 million. This is looking at developing Belfast Central Library in its current footprint. The original estimates looked at maybe extending it. The work done has proven that not only can this be done in the library's current footprint, which is the preferred option for the library, but there will be a reduction on the original estimates. As my colleague Gerry Kelly and, indeed, Alban Maginness said, it is important that Belfast Central Library is redeveloped, because it is probably one of the biggest landscapes in the city and definitely needs some tender, loving care. It has a great future in the city of Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask all Members to make sure that they project their

voices towards the microphones so that Hansard can pick them up.

Mr Hussey: Has the Minister considered refurbishing any other libraries in the Belfast area? I heard her briefly mention the business plan. Does that include other Belfast libraries?

Ms Ní Chuilín: This is just for Belfast Central Library. Other libraries have been refurbished in the Belfast area. The Member may be aware of one that was recently opened on the Lisburn Road. The Falls and Shankill libraries were refurbished, as was Whiterock library, and I know of other libraries that received small amounts of investment that have made a big difference to their users. They now have far more pleasant surroundings for people to visit. The introduction of free Wi-Fi has seen an increase in numbers. I encourage everyone, if they have not done so already, to sign up with their local library, because additional members help to sustain and maintain the libraries for the future.

Arm's-length Bodies: Remuneration

4. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether all membership positions on the boards of her Department's arm's-length bodies (ALBs) are remunerated. (AQO 8797/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The majority of positions on the boards of my Department's arm's-length bodies are not remunerated. However, travel and subsistence expenses are payable. Some positions are remunerated, including the chairs and vice-chairs of the boards of the Arts Council, Foras na Gaeilge, Libraries NI, Museums NI, NI Screen, Sport NI and the Ulster-Scots Agency and board member positions on the boards of Foras na Gaeilge, Libraries NI and the Ulster-Scots Agency.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister. I am sure that she will join me in paying tribute to the many men and women who give voluntarily of their time. Even if some of them are remunerated, quite often that does not recognise the amount of effort they put into the organisations. Will she update us on the issue of the position of chairperson of the board of Sport NI?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The chairperson of Sport NI did not resign. He is still in post and he is doing a wonderful job.

I fully agree with the Member's comments. Some of the expenses cover things like subsistence and travel. When it comes to chairs and vice-chairs, the additional responsibility that they have goes well above and beyond what many have signed up to. The chair of Sport NI is still there, as is the vice-chair, and both are doing an excellent job.

2.15 pm

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister explain what steps her Department is taking to improve the diversity of the boards of ALBs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The question of diversity keeps coming up, and I want to put on record my commitment to ensuring that we not only maintain but increase diversity on boards of public bodies. I can speak only for my Department, but having looked at its representation of women, people with disabilities and people from ethnic minorities, I have gone some way to ensuring that as many people from as many backgrounds as possible can apply.

The Member will be glad to hear that Departments are working together on that issue to ensure that there is a more effective approach taken. Some of the DCAL competitions have included contact with representative bodies such as Disability Action, NICVA, the Rural Community Network and Women in Business to ensure that we have greater diversity of people on our boards.

Team GB: Northern Ireland Athletes

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what further engagement she has had with Sport NI to enable Northern Ireland athletes to compete for Team GB. (AQO 8798/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Athletes from the North of Ireland are already able to compete for Team GB in a range of sports, such as rowing, athletics and cycling. Responsibility for selecting athletes to compete at international competitions, including for Team GB at the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the Commonwealth Games, rests with sports governing bodies and with the council responsible for sending a local team to competitions, such as the Olympic Committee, the Paralympic Committee and the Commonwealth Games Council.

The recognition of sport governing bodies is a matter for the sport itself and for Sport NI, which operates a joint policy on governing body recognition with the sports councils in England, Scotland and Wales. The aim of the recognition process is to identify a single lead governing body structure that governs a sport in, for example, England, Scotland or Wales, or, in the case of the North, in Ulster or across the island of Ireland. The policy is aligned to international best practice and was designed to help promote good relations in sport and foster social inclusion.

Mr Allister: I note that, not for the first time, the Minister dodges the question. She refers to, for example, rowers being able to compete for Team GB, but that is only if they be affiliated and live and operate on the UK mainland. If they want to compete as an athlete from here, the Minister continues to barricade their route, and there is no pathway —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member ask his question, please?

Mr Allister: — for them to compete for Team GB if they want to be affiliated —

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

Mr Allister: — and operate here. Will the Minister not address that inequity and allow those athletes to express their Britishness, which they are supposed to be able to do?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, anyone can identify himself or herself as either Irish or British. As I said in the primary answer, it is a matter for the governing body. I have repeated that to the Member, so I know that he understands the question but just does not like the answer.

I have made it easier for people to compete. I have supported athletes regardless of what identity they choose. Regardless of the team that they want to compete for, they have been given my full support. I encourage the Member to get behind the athletes and stop this ridiculous nonsense of sectarianising sport and bringing in issues that —

Mr Allister: You are the one sectarianising it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — do not involve what athletes need to do.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an cheist a fhreagairt. Tá ceist agam: an aontaíonn an tAire liomsa gur chóir go mbeadh sé faoi na forais atá ina ngobharnóirí ar na spóirt seo cinneadh a dhéanamh faoi cad é mar a ba chóir dóibh iad féin a eagrú agus gan an Rialtas a bheith ag cur isteach ar an cheart sin?

Does the Minister agree with me that it is the right of the governing bodies of sports to decide how they should best organise themselves and that it is not the role of the Government to interfere in that organisation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Aontaím leat go hiomlán. I completely agree with you. I know that the Member heard the response that I gave to Mr Allister. I have continually repeated the case that the responsibility rests with the governing body. As political representatives and certainly as governments, we should not be involved in creating impediments or barriers to prevent athletes from competing for whatever team they wish. In fact, it is our duty to support athletes regardless of what team or what nationality they wish to compete for.

T:BUC: Rural Areas

6. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has any plans to develop a programme for Together: Building a United Community in rural areas. (AQO 8799/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. My Department leads on one of the seven headline actions from across the Executive's Together: Building a United Community strategy, namely the development of a cross-community youth sports programme. The principal focus of the sports programme is to enhance good relations through the transformative power of sport and creative activity. In line with T:BUC, the sports programme will need to have a rural dimension. This recognises not only that interfaces are physical barriers but that they can lead to less visible social, economic and cultural barriers that impact on rural communities. If the cross-community youth sports programme is to be successful, it must look at improving good relations, and it must take into account the particular challenges faced by rural communities. It is my intention to run a pilot programme in a rural area very soon. I will set out where this pilot will take place, and I will do so in the coming weeks.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. Does the Minister envisage any potential to include cycling as part of the T:BUC sports programme in a rural area?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Cycling is one of the sports that have been used as an example. There were events in Dunloy and other parts, and we only had to look at the spectacle of the Giro d'Italia to see that there is a big interest in cycling. I know that some of the sports clubs have very strong cross-community participation, and the work that those clubs do across the board, including cycling, helps children and young people, in particular, in areas that face challenges and where those children and young people face certain ongoing difficulties. I certainly see cycling as one of the sports that could be used as part of the pilot scheme to introduce T:BUC into a rural community.

Mr Somerville: Is the Minister aware of Clogher Valley Rugby Football Club and the fantastic work that it does to promote community relations? I declare an interest as a member of the club. What financial assistance is available to all sporting clubs in our constituency to help to build a united community?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Clogher Valley rugby club and many others will be aware of the recent strand one of the Sport NI capital investment programme, albeit that it closed in July. As well as that, there are sports lottery programmes and small-to-medium-sized grants. There are opportunities through Sport NI's capital investment programme for your club and many other clubs, particularly in rural communities. In my opinion, the work of the new councils in conjunction with Sport NI has, thus far, helped to bring more information and maybe better collaboration with some of the clubs to try to get an investment that they all can share.

Mr Dallat: Given that we are still a long way from the ultimate goal of being a united community, I would welcome the Minister outlining the benefits of the Together: Building a United Community programme.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to do that. The Member will know from his constituency of the facility in Coleraine that we invested in. That is an example of groups, areas and councils coming together on the principles of T:BUC well before the funding investment hit the ground. It is certainly welcome.

A pilot scheme is running between two deprived areas in west Belfast and south Belfast. I knew,

even before the evaluation report was completed, that that was a success. I met some of the children and young people, their youth leaders and their parents, all of whom said not only that this work needs to be continued but that investment in it needs to be increased. We look after children and keep them safe, but, when we keep them fit, healthy and well, we invest in the future of those kids and those communities.

Sport NI: Board Members

7. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the appointment of new members to the board of Sport NI. (AQO 8800/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. As the Member is aware, nine members of the board of Sport NI resigned in July. I have commissioned an open competition to appoint up to five new members to the board. It was advertised in the local press on 10 and 11 September with a closing date of 5 October. The competition is being taken forward in accordance with the Commissioner for Public Appointments' 'Code of Practice for Ministerial Public Appointments'. I expect the new appointments to be made in December. I have acted to ensure that the board continues to operate effectively in the meantime. I can confirm that, following a circular that I sent seeking volunteers throughout the Civil Service, three civil servants have been co-opted to provide advice and support to the remaining board members. The volunteers will also provide additional support by sitting on a number of committees, including the audit and risk management committee. This is an interim measure, and the co-opted senior civil servants are not board members and do not have full voting rights.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for that answer. Minister, to lose part of a board might be described as unfortunate; to lose it again would be a disaster. What steps are you taking to ensure that the new board that you appoint does not resign again?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am still at a loss as to why the nine members resigned. I offered to meet them to ascertain their reasons: one of them accepted that offer. I have spoken to others who have spoken to others who have spoken to others, but, rather than relying on fifth- and sixth-hand information, I think the point is that, when I was presented with the problem and challenge, I acted immediately. The co-option of members of the Senior Civil Service onto the

board is an interim measure. In fairness to the five remaining members, they need support from us all. I thank the members who came forward. These temporary measures will be in place only until the remaining appointments are made. I hope that we will then go through exercises, information, discussions and meetings to ensure that people not only feel supported but understand their role. I am really encouraged by the response and the interest that there was. People still feel very loyal to Sport NI and, indeed, sport.

Mr Allister: Could the Minister update us on the position of chief executive of Sport NI? There is presently an acting chief executive. Is that situation to continue, or is there a recruitment process? Are there outstanding matters to be attended to in respect of the former chief executive?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that it is inappropriate to comment on the chief executive because the grievance process is still ongoing. The interim chief executive will be there until the grievance procedure has been completed. I hope that we can move forward once that has been completed. However, I have acted very decisively to ensure that, in the interim, there is leadership given at Sport NI at an executive level.

First World War: Centenary Events

8. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the support given by her Department for First World War centenary events. (AQO 8801/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In 2013-14, my Department provided £50,000 of funding to the Nerve Centre to develop the Creative Centenaries online platform, which provides a suite of online resources relating to the decade of centenaries. This was followed by a further £50,000 in 2014-15. I was pleased to provide Museums with funding of £127,000 to open a new modern history gallery that addresses the decade of centenaries, including the First World War. It opened to the public in November of last year. My Department also provided Museums with £50,000 for its programme to develop digital resources exploring the decade of centenaries.

For the period 2013-15, the Arts Council has provided grants of over £33,000 to organisations, including £6,000 to the Somme Association for reflections to the Irish soldier on the Somme; £20,000 to the DU Dance and Alternative Energies First World War project;

and over £7,500 to Rathcoole Friends of the Somme.

My Department is also providing £30,000 in this financial year in the run-up to the anniversary of the battle of the Somme to support the Somme Heritage Centre in delivering its plans.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The time for listed questions is up. We now move on to topical questions.

2.30 pm

Easter Rising Centenary: DCAL Funding

T1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what budget her Department has set aside to celebrate the centenary of the Easter rising next year. (AQT 2941/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I anticipate that the budgets will be equal. In addition, I am happy to say that other members of the DCAL family, including Libraries and PRONI, have been very proactive in all the work for the decade of centenaries. I anticipate that that same energy and commitment will be given to the commemoration of the 1916 rising.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, will you outline whether you have had any further discussions with the Irish Government about cross-border cooperation in the centenary celebrations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly have. The famine commemoration last week was done very sensitively. It was organised by the National Famine Commemoration Committee. I give credit to Newry and Mourne council for its participation and commitment. I envisage that the same commitment will be given not only to the 1916 Easter rising but to all commemorations thereafter.

Rugby World Cup 2023

T2. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she agrees that having a competition such as the Rugby World Cup so close to home increases the interest in the sport and whether she is supportive of ensuring that the Casement Park development progresses in a timely manner so as to be included as a venue in the 2023 Rugby World Cup bid, given that many of us across the Chamber have been following Ireland's

success in the ongoing Rugby World Cup. (AQT 2942/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly. The Rugby World Cup 2023 bid has been the focus of a lot of attention. It is important that Casement Park is redeveloped for that. We have been in discussions with Irish Rugby and the Ulster Council of the GAA, along with colleagues in DETI and many others. So, we are committed to ensuring that not only is the stadia programme delivered but that all opportunities, not just for sport but tourism, are exploited around the 2023 bid.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given what she said and the level of public funding that has been allocated to redevelop the three major stadia, I have today launched a consultation on a proposal to allow the three stadia to apply for a liquor licence. Does the Minister agree that we should do all that we can to ensure that the stadia can maximise their potential?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely agree. We need to not only look at the physical redevelopment of the stadia but at rates, particularly for Ulster Rugby, which was hit very hard with rates. That does not stack up against the original outline that we had in the business cases, but it is something that we are looking at. We are looking at every opportunity to try not only to generate income, which will lessen the demand on the public purse, but to look at providing social opportunities for people when they attend sporting events and other opportunities.

Northern Ireland Events Company: Audit Office Report

T3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to explain why the Northern Ireland Audit Office took five and a half years to report on the failure of the Northern Ireland Events Company. (AQT 2943/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is that I have absolutely no idea. That was not committed on my watch. I have had absolutely nothing to do with the report because it was transferred over to DETI due to some of the issues that have been highlighted in the report. Had it been under my watch and on my desk, it would not have taken that long.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her answer. I wonder what lessons have been learned from this calamity. What steps have been taken to ensure that it cannot happen again?

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, the Member will be aware that events have now been transferred over to DETI. I am not dodging the question, but it is more appropriate to DETI. Dolores Kelly raised the question of public scrutiny. It is about who you appoint to the board. Be clear about the roles and responsibilities that you are asking people to do. It is about proper scrutiny from Departments on the boards to ensure that the correct information, particularly for accounting officers, is adhered to, and, where there are gaps and weaknesses, that they are met by the Department. I have to say that the report is shameful reading. Anybody who was involved in that and anybody who is on a public board or body linked to a Department will, I am sure, have the report on their desk. There are lessons to be learned for everybody in it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Conor Murphy has withdrawn his name from the list.

Foyle Valley Gateway Master Plan

T5. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the investment that her Department has given to the Foyle valley gateway master plan, given that she will be aware of the interest in Derry in the development of the Brandywell Stadium, which is central to the gateway project, with an advance in that process this week through a letter of offer from the social investment fund, alongside the money provided by Derry City and Strabane District Council. (AQT 2945/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In fairness to Derry City, I think that people in the New Lodge are aware that the Brandywell is getting money, so fair play to you for that. As the Member is aware, my contribution to the Foyle valley gateway master plan is that I am working very closely with Derry City and Strabane District Council. We are finalising the business case so that it can go forward for funding. I anticipate that those final bits of work will be done very soon, and, hopefully, we will be able to progress the project from there.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. She has given an indication of the work that she has done on the Foyle valley gateway master plan and the number of interest groups involved in that. Will she accept an invitation to come to Derry and meet the groups and, if they develop the stadium, perhaps the football club?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes and yes. I am happy to accept. Glacaim leis an chuireadh. Thank you very much for the invitation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Pat Sheehan has withdrawn his name from the list to ask topical questions.

Sport NI Capital Programme: Update

T7. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the Sport NI capital programme. (AQT 2947/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said earlier in answer to a similar question, the first strand closed in July. I expect that, by the end of this month, the review and evaluation of those application forms will be completed, so people should know the status of their application by then.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Minister, in recent times, I have met a number of GAA clubs in County Fermanagh that expressed an interest in this programme. Will Sport NI occasionally give updates to ensure that people are informed? Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Ní Chuilín: In fairness to the Member, that is one of the concerns that I picked up along the way. However, in fairness to Sport NI, it indicated recently to groups that asked questions and raised concerns that it intends to make decisions very soon on applications for which the closing date was July this year. I expect that they will be known by the end of this month.

June Monitoring Round: DCAL Bid

T8. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her bid in the June monitoring round for capital and resource. (AQT 2948/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that the June monitoring round still has not been agreed.

Mr Gardiner: I will fill you in on this one anyway. Given the delay in deciding the June monitoring round, how does the Minister intend to prioritise her spending for the rest of the year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not need the Member to fill me in on that. I am more than aware of my Department's budgets, challenges and

constraints. Along with my executive team in DCAL, I am working through our budgets and re-profiling them. I hope that, when the Executive next meet, we can sort out the money difficulties that all Departments face.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Fra McCann is not in his place.

Windsor Park: Update

T10. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assurances she can give the House that the work scheduled at Windsor Park will be completed sufficiently for the fans, given that he is sure that she has her scarf and rattle bought for the Euro qualifier on Thursday. (AQT 2950/11-16)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Windsor Park is in the Member's constituency, and I am sure that he can confirm that the redevelopment of Windsor Park has happened and that it is going very well. Fans, even when they went to the games in June, were pleased that their journey to and from Windsor Park was not that much impeded, as expected; traffic flowed well, and there were no incidents to report. I am very pleased with the process and with the speed at which the redevelopment of Windsor is happening.

Mr McKinney: It is great to have ambition at the heart of these things, and, clearly, when people see a project nearing completion, or being completed, they expect more. The access issue that you raised is important. Are there any further discussions about how access in and around the city for Windsor Park will be catered for?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that the IFA works very closely with the PSNI, and not just on traffic management; it also works very closely with the Ambulance Service and with the Fire and Rescue Service, as well, in conjunction with Belfast City Council, which, at the end of the day, is the statutory authority for safety certificates. All of that is based on traffic management plans. The safety certificate is not just about the capacity at games; it is all about how people get to and go from games. I am content with the arrangements that they have made thus far, and, in fairness, they are always looking for ways to improve them. If there are hiccups going to or from a game, they very quickly learn the lessons for the next opportunity. I think that residents have appreciated that quick response.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of topical questions to the Minister. As the next period of questions does not begin until 2.45 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until then.

2.45 pm

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Question No 12 has been withdrawn.

Schools: Fair Employment

1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of fair employment in schools. (AQO 8807/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Department of Education does not employ staff in schools. I am aware that the Education Authority has developed guidance regarding the selection and recruitment of teaching and non-teaching staff in controlled schools and for non-teaching staff in Catholic-maintained schools. The purpose of that guidance is to ensure compliance with the legislative framework regarding fair employment. Similarly, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has a recruitment and selection scheme in place for operation in Catholic-maintained schools for teaching staff.

I welcome the approach that the employing authorities are taking to ensure compliance and consistency in fair employment. In voluntary grammar, grant-maintained, integrated and Irish-medium schools, where they are employers in their own right, each board of governors is responsible for implementing and adhering to the legislative framework for fair employment.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for that short response. He knows that this matter has been going on for some time. In fact, on 25 May 2015, Minister, you told me:

"I have not written to OFMDFM on this matter",

although you had already agreed that, in fact, the fair employment issue was one for OFMDFM, and I agree with you there. However, in April, you told my colleague, Mrs Overend, here beside me, that you had written to OFMDFM on the matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Could the Member come to his question?

Mr Cree: Will you please clarify whether you are for it or against it?

Mr O'Dowd: Every Question Time since April is like Groundhog Day. This error of mine haunts me at every Question Time. The Member knows my position fine well because, following that Question Time, I made sure that every Member of the Assembly was provided with clarification around the error I made in my initial response. The Member is fully aware of my position on the issue and I have no doubt that the rest of the House is fully aware as well.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for the detail in his answer. What specific role does he have in ensuring that schools adhere to employment legislation?

Mr O'Dowd: As I pointed out in my answer to Mr Cree, we have various employing authorities for schools, whether it is the Education Authority, the CCMS, voluntary grammars, voluntary maintained or the Irish-medium sector etc. I have an accountability mechanism, in that I am accountable to the Assembly on behalf of the education system and budget, and I certainly take that role very seriously. However, fair employment legislation is the responsibility of OFMDFM. In monitoring the accountability mechanisms in our education system, I answer to the Assembly, the Education Committee and others, but, legislatively, fair employment falls under OFMDFM.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his response thus far. What steps are being taken by the Department to ensure that all students and teachers have greater access to the certificate in religious education?

Mr O'Dowd: Steps have been taken over the last number of years to ensure that students have access to the certificate. We have access courses through St Mary's and distance learning through the University of Glasgow. Measures are also being taken in relation to Stranmillis as well. We are trying to ensure that the religious certificate is accessible to all teachers, regardless of their background.

Mr Allister: Would it not be better, Minister, to go a step beyond accessibility and ensure that the certificate in Catholic religious education was removed from being applicable to non-religious subjects? There is no Catholic mathematics or Catholic geography. Why do

we need a Catholic certificate in education to teach those subjects?

Mr O'Dowd: It is not in breach of equality or fair employment legislation, and we have been advised of that on several occasions. If the Member wishes to raise those concerns with OFMDFM, then he is perfectly entitled to do so.

Capital Build: South Tyrone

2. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on capital build projects in south Tyrone, including St Patrick's Academy, Edendork Primary School and the shared education campus in Moy. (AQO 8808/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I was delighted to announce a number of major works capital build projects in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency. The new build project for Enniskillen Model, at an approved cost of £6 million, requires an addendum to the business case owing to design issues. St Patrick's Academy in Dungannon, with an approved business case for £28.7 million, is anticipated to go to on-site this financial year. The Devenish College project has an approved business case for £23.2 million, and the design team appointment is under way. The Portora Royal/Collegiate Grammar business case is currently being prepared, and the business case for Edendork Primary School is anticipated to be approved in this financial year.

There are also a number of school enhancement projects (SEPs) in the constituency area, valued at over £14 million. Those include schemes for Erne Integrated College and Willowbridge Special School in Enniskillen that are on-site and progressing well. A second project for Erne Integrated College is shovel-ready but is being held owing to budget constraints. Projects for Mount Lourdes Grammar and St Michael's College in Enniskillen are currently at the design stage.

Those major works and SEPs represent a significant investment in the constituency, and not only in economic terms, as they will benefit the children and the community in the area. All projects that are not contractually committed to will be subject to funding being available.

The Moy shared education campus for St John's Primary School in Moy and for Moy Regional Primary School is at the business case stage. If approved, the project will be released to construction procurement, subject to funding being available.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply. It most definitely is a good-news story for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. How many school enhancement programmes has he been able to release for construction so far?

Mr O'Dowd: In October 2013, I announced the school enhancement projects. The latest position on SEPs is that 40 projects have now had their final design approved, 34 have been released to construction and six are being held owing to budget constraints. Over the past number of months, I have been able to release more projects, of which 22 are on-site, with a further six expected to go on-site by the end of the year. At the start of September, I released a further six projects to move towards construction stage owing to slippages and other capital projects. If I am able to secure funding either internally in the Department from capital or externally, I will move forward the other SEPs as well.

Mr Somerville: The Minister may have already touched on this. Does he not find it ridiculous that the shared education projects, such as the one in the Moy, have been put on hold because of issues that have nothing to do with shared education? Does the Minister know when that will be sorted out?

Mr O'Dowd: I suspect that the Member is referring to levels of progression, and he is correct in one sense. We are not measuring shared education through levels of progression; we are measuring educational attainment through levels of progression across our shared education funding initiatives. They are voluntary, so it is up to schools whether they apply to the scheme. There is £25 million of funds available from the Department, OFMDFM and Atlantic Philanthropies.

It is only right and proper that we measure the educational attainment of our young people through those schemes, as we would through any other scheme. At the very centre of levels of progression is the professional judgement of the teacher. That is at the very centre of it. We are relying on and supporting the professional judgement of teachers to set the progression levels of their pupils. How will we moderate that? We will moderate it through bringing together teachers in a cluster and asking them to moderate the scores that have been given in a number of schools around their area. Over time, that will allow teachers to reach a professional judgement on where a one, two, three, four or five should be graded in the system. That is right and proper.

I know that trade unions have concerns around a range of areas. I am prepared to look at the workload, and I am prepared to look at when, how and for what purposes reporting mechanisms are reported back to my Department or the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). I think that the outstanding issues can be resolved. Indeed, I am meeting the unions immediately after Question Time to discuss levels of progression again and how we resolve the issues. I think that, with a fair wind and an open mind, we will be able to resolve the issues around levels of progression and that all those schools out there that wish to partake in shared education projects will be able to do so.

Mrs Overend: On that point, does the Minister recognise the inequality in the decision to force those schools that want to carry out a shared education project to provide those statistics, when all the other schools are not forced to do that?

Mr O'Dowd: There are many inequalities in our education system, again highlighted by the Equality Commission's report this morning and how we work out those inequalities to ensure that every young person has an equal opportunity in education, but I do not recognise inequalities in ensuring that a school that wishes to enter a shared education project can do so. It is not being forced. Statutory levels of progression. Statutory assessment. The Education Committee and the Assembly have passed regulations that mean that I, as Minister, have to use statutory assessment. I have no choice in that matter. Statutory assessment is exactly what it says on the tin — statutory assessment. It is not only shared education projects that are required to return levels of progression. All schools, under the law, are required to return levels of progression. There is a union dispute over that. As I said to your colleague, I believe that, with an open mind on both sides, we can resolve the issue and resolve it quite quickly.

Special Educational Needs: Irish-medium Sector

3. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken by the Education Authority to ensure that children with special educational needs in the Irish-medium sector receive the same level of support as similar pupils in other schools. (AQO 8809/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: Special educational needs provision is matched to the individual needs of

the child regardless of school sector. The process is child-centred to ensure that children from all sectors, including Irish-medium, have access to an appropriate education that supports them to achieve their personal potential in terms of age and ability, aptitude and any special educational needs that they may have.

My Department has provided additional funding of £525,000 to enable the Education Authority to deliver work on strengthening special educational needs identification, assessment and provision in Irish-medium schools, including capacity-building projects, sharing best practice and the provision of SEN support tailored to Irish-medium settings. The EA worked with the Irish-medium regional special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) steering group in the planning and delivery of those support packages. Importantly, there is evidence from school inspections that those interventions have led to notable improvements in SEN provision in the Irish-medium sector, including an increased awareness around SEN issues, enhanced knowledge among practitioners and SENCOs and improved outcomes for pupils.

As part of the review of SEN and inclusion, further capacity-building work has been funded and undertaken to support SEN in the Irish-medium sector, including an Irish-medium education early years SEN conference, the provision of SEN resource files and an early years handbook tailored for the Irish-medium sector, which was developed by the Irish-medium practitioners, with input and advice from the Education and Training Inspectorate.

Both the Education Authority and my Department remain committed to working with the Irish-medium sector to ensure a standard of special educational needs provision that enables every young person to fulfil their potential at every stage of their development.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaimse buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Is í an cheist a ba mhaith liom cur ar an Aire: cad é mar is féidir leis a dhéanamh cinnte de go mbeidh ábaltacht agus tuiscint ar an Ghaeilge ag na speisialtóirí seo, mar shampla ag na síceolaithe oideachasúla? I thank the Minister for his answer. How can he help to ensure that those specialists, like educational psychologists, have a good understanding of the Irish language, which will enable them to carry out the work within the Irish-medium sector with a much greater degree of competence?

Mr O'Dowd: I think that the Member will agree that I have read out quite a comprehensive list of interventions and support that have been provided to the Irish-medium sector over the last number of years, and it is beginning to pay dividends, but there is still work to do. There are still objectives to be achieved. We are building a sector, and the support mechanisms around that, with the provision of specialists with proficient Irish language, is a goal that we have to achieve, but it will be achieved over a number of years. At this stage, we have achieved a lot, but I accept the Member's comments. We still have a lot of work to do, particularly in terms of professionals working in the sector who are proficient in the Irish language to engage with pupils, parents and teachers.

3.00 pm

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. An dtig liom a fhiafraí den Aire an gcuirfeadh soláthar Gaeloideachais san áireamh san athbhreithniú reatha ar ionaid tacaíochta foghlama atá idir lámha ag an Udarás Oideachais? I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Will Irish-medium provision be taken into consideration in the current review of learning support centres being carried out by the Education Authority?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that they should not be reading their questions.

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta. Yes is the simple answer to that. Any element of our education system that is under review or development or is being delivered has to take into account our duties around the Irish-medium and integrated sectors. So, yes, that provision will be taken into account.

Preschool Provision: South Belfast

4. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of preschool provision in South Belfast. (AQO 8810/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Authority (EA) is responsible for ensuring that there is adequate preschool provision available to meet the Programme for Government commitment. For September 2015 admissions, additional places were allocated to existing providers, and four new non-statutory providers were brought into the preschool education programme to meet demand in the BT9, BT10 and BT12 areas of

South Belfast. An additional 36 places were approved under temporary flexibility arrangements for eight statutory nursery settings in the constituency.

At the end of stage 2 of the admissions process, 11 children whose parents engaged with the process from the beginning were unplaced in South Belfast. The EA has advised me that the additional places allocated for September 2015 were sufficient to meet the demand for unplaced children in South Belfast should parents have wished to avail themselves of them. There are still unfilled places in the BT8, BT9, BT10 and BT12 areas. The EA has advised that it anticipates that demand for places in South Belfast will decrease in 2016 but that it will keep that under review. I will continue to support the EA to ensure that sufficient preschool places are available across all areas for September 2016 admissions.

Mr McGimpsey: I refer to the Minister's answer. The fact was that there was a major issue about places. The Belfast Education and Library Board certainly stepped forward to solve that, but it did that via the provision of part-time places. Does the Minister agree that it is better to have full-time rather than part-time places and that children are suffering? We only have to look at the report that was published this week about the plight of Protestant working-class boys, educational underachievement —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his question.

Mr McGimpsey: — and ethnic minorities.

Mr O'Dowd: It is not accurate to say that children are suffering because they have a part-time placement instead of a full-time placement. The last piece of research on which the Department makes its decisions shows that there is little, if any, difference in child development between full-time and part-time placement for a child at the relevant age.

In the ideal world, I would like to provide every child with a full-time place. The socio-economic benefits to wider society and the child can be measured. However, in the current budgetary climate, it is simply impossible to provide not only the places but the infrastructure to ensure that you have full-time provision in every setting. Many settings run two part-time sittings in the one day. I am satisfied that the preschool education programme is meeting, and, at times, exceeding, its potential. In South Belfast, we have well met our Programme for Government targets.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: Mo bhuíochas, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Over the summer, education officials worked with me, representative McGimpsey and others around the issue of preschool places. At the end of the process, how many preschool places were left unfilled in South Belfast?

Mr O'Dowd: My understanding of the current situation in South Belfast is that there are 54 unfilled places. Those are places that remain vacant and could be filled if the demand were there.

GCSE Grading

5. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to ensure the local GCSE grading system remains compatible with the new numerical grading system being introduced in England. (AQO 8811/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The changes to GCSE grading to a 9-to-1 grading system apply to qualifications developed in England. Education is a devolved matter, and it is for me to decide whether there is merit in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment adopting a 9-to-1 grading system here or whether it should retain the existing system. My Department held a consultation on the issue. In reaching my decision, I will take into account the responses that have been received from a range of stakeholders, including young people, parents, teachers, schools, principals, universities and trade unions. My decision will be based on what I consider to be in the best interests of our young people.

It is, of course, important that any decision that is taken ensures that qualifications that are offered here are relevant and appropriate for our young people and our economy. It is also vital that qualifications offered here continue to be recognised by universities and employers across the island and beyond. That is why I will seek to ensure that our qualifications retain the currency and portability that they have long enjoyed.

Mr McKinney: There is no direct equivalence between the A* grade at GCSE and grade 10 in the English model. How will the Department ensure that children from here who are applying for, for example, high-demand courses like veterinary science in England will not be penalised?

Mr O'Dowd: You could argue that there is no direct equivalence between the Scottish

qualifications and the grade 9 or grade 1 qualification in England. You could argue that the Welsh, who are going down to the route of retaining grades from A* through B, C, D etc, have overcome that obstacle. You could argue that there is no direct equivalence between exams that are set in Singapore, Germany or Austria. But, do you know what? Universities and employers manage their way through all these things. We should not become fixated on the idea that it is beyond the realms of possibility to provide equivalence between the current range of marks that we use here and the changes that have been devised in England.

Remember that it is a devolved issue. The then Secretary of State Michael Gove and his successor made decisions on what they believe is best for their education system. I will make decisions that I believe are best for our education system and ensure that there is continued portability with our exams. We should not allow any devolved institution, or Westminster, to set our education policy. We most certainly should not allow the examinations bodies, many of which are private consortiums, to set our education policy either.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister inform the House about the true extent of the consultation on this issue and whether the response was reflective of the Northern Ireland population? Primarily, did he seek responses from the higher and further education sectors and businesses that will actually use these grades to assess students' ability to get into universities and further education and as a basis of their employability skills? Will he undertake to remedy this situation?

Mr O'Dowd: It appears that you have answered your own question, because you believe that the consultation was not correct. You have not provided me with any evidence in your question

Mrs Overend: I asked you a question, Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr O'Dowd: You have not provided me with any evidence in your question or your statement that the consultation was flawed. I do not believe that it was flawed. It was open to the public to respond to, regardless of who they were or what sector they were from. The responses have been quite healthy and informed and have shown that there is significant interest in the issue. It shows the challenges that there are in making a decision

on this matter but, thankfully, it also shows the huge interest that remains out there in our education system.

St Bernard's Primary School, Newtownabbey

6. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Education to detail the school enhancement programme (SEP) for St Bernard's Primary School, Newtownabbey. (AQO 8812/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I have committed almost £1 million to the SEP at St Bernard's Primary School. That will provide additional accommodation to include five new classrooms, as well as the refurbishment of existing buildings. This investment reflects the significant accommodation shortfall at St Bernard's Primary School and the limitations of the existing school layout. It is expected that the works contractor will be on site in early 2016, with an anticipated construction programme of 12 months. I am therefore hopeful that the school will be enjoying the benefits of its extension and refurbishment by Christmas 2016 or early 2017.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers up to now and for the investment in St Bernard's. The money will be used for five new classrooms and to renovate and remodel seven other existing rooms. That shows that there is a growing population in the area.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Is there a question, please?

Mr G Kelly: I am coming to it. Will the Minister give us details of other recent minor works projects that have been completed?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I thank the Member for his question and comments. In general, the school enhancement programme has been a significant step forward in how we invest in our schools. A relatively small amount of capital — around £1 million will be spent next year — will transform that school, whereas, in the past, the only choice was a complete rebuild. Now, here we are: £1 million is being reinvested in the school and in ensuring that it is future-proofed for generations of young people in the area. We have also spent a significant amount on minor works at that facility: around £350,000 has been spent on disability adaptation, outdoor play areas, traffic management etc. All of those have been in the mix over the last number of

years, during which St Bernard's has received quite significant investment. I wish it well for the future.

Schools: Anti-sectarianism Programmes

7. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Education to detail what programmes are in place to promote anti-sectarianism in primary and post-primary schools. (AQO 8813/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order 2007 provides opportunities to address anti-sectarianism in primary and post-primary schools. That is done largely through personal development and mutual understanding at primary level and through local and global citizenship at post-primary levels. At post-primary level, opportunities are also provided in other subjects through developing pupils as contributors to society. It is for schools to determine which programmes and resources best meet the particular needs of their pupils.

My community relations, equality and diversity policy underpins and supports the curriculum requirement by educating young people on developing self-respect and respect for others. It also promotes equality and works to eliminate discrimination. My shared education policy will also provide opportunities for pupils to learn about each other from each other and contribute to learning on anti-sectarianism.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. I was recently deeply disappointed by what happened in my constituency. A number of young people getting on to a school bus in Dunnamanagh were victims of sectarian abuse. Those young individuals are frightened to go to school every day as a result. It has been reported to the local authorities. Minister, will you join me in condemning that sectarianism and communicate with the local authority on addressing the issue and making sure that it is resolved urgently?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no hesitation in condemning it. Sectarianism from any quarter is absolutely wrong, and sectarianism directed against young people is abhorrent. I have no difficulty in engaging with the Education Authority to see what measures it is taking to ensure the safety of all children in that community.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister tell the House how he intends to make sure that shared education in the future is curriculum-based, so that we do not have continually to apologise for introducing it but can point to the fact that children are learning together and are not simply involved in some minor activities together?

Mr O'Dowd: I have said often that the shared education policy developed by my Department and the legislation that we will bring to the House is catch-up time. We are catching up with many, many schools that have been involved in shared education over many years and are deeply devoted to its principle. Its being embedded in the curriculum goes back to one of the first questions that I was asked. This is about young people studying the curriculum together and how we measure the educational attainment and success that comes from that curriculum.

We are on a journey on which there have been many twists and turns, but I think that things are improving, particularly in education. People are reaching out to each other. It is not the case that we have to make everybody the same or work towards a system in which everybody is the same. We need to ensure that everybody can be different and that we respect difference. Through the shared education programme, I want our young people to learn about each other from each other, and that takes in all the issues in young people's lives so that they can debate, discuss, learn, analyse and research all aspects of the diverse community that we all now live in.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

BME Schoolchildren: Barriers to Success

T1. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Education what he believes are the barriers for BME children in schools and what action he is taking to redress such inequalities, given that, today, the Equality Commission published its draft statement on key inequalities in education in Northern Ireland, which highlights that minority ethnic pupils are more likely to leave school with no GCSEs than white school-leavers and are over twice as likely to enter unemployment after leaving school. (AQT 2951/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: The barriers facing our ethnic minorities are multifaceted. They are as much to do with learning and interacting with our education system as they are with the Department ensuring that newcomers to our society are aware of the support, benefits and mechanisms in our education system that are there to ensure that their young people have every opportunity in life. That is a challenge for the Department, as much as anything.

There are also cultural differences. When you look at the report, you see that there are different levels of attainment in different ethnic minorities. There are different experiences from different ethnic groups in our education system, and we have to learn from that as well. Social deprivation and social isolation also play a role. That is something for wider society to be involved in to ensure that everyone in society feels safe, valued and allowed to integrate into society. There are huge challenges ahead, but it is something that I am conscious of. I welcome the fact that the Member has asked the question, because it broadens the debate. We have had a very narrow debate about the Equality Commission report; there are other things that we need to have a very close look at.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Another finding in the report shocked and disappointed me in many ways: there is a lot of racist bullying in schools. The report states that:

"Generally, a barrier to addressing bullying in schools is that schools tend to lack knowledge of how to effectively confront the issue of racist bullying and may in some cases have difficulty acknowledging that a problem exists."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member come to her question, please?

Ms Lo: Yes. I wanted to refer to that paragraph to remind the Minister. I am really disappointed. Ethnic minority communities have been here for a long time — since the '60s.

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

Ms Lo: Yes. What has the Department been doing in those years to address bullying?

Mr O'Dowd: I, too, read the commentary about how, in the opinion of the Equality Commission, schools deal with bullying, particularly racism,

but I am not sure what research is behind that assertion by the Equality Commission. I will engage with the Equality Commission on the entire report in the time ahead, because I think that it may be something of a broad sweeping statement to suggest that our schools are not equipped. There may be individual cases, and if it is worse than individual cases, it is, certainly, something that we have to pay attention to.

Only this week, I forwarded to the Executive legislation on bullying to strengthen bullying policies in our schools, to strengthen the role of boards of governors in tackling bullying in our schools, and to give more guidance and advice to our schools on tackling bullying. One of the areas that I have identified is racist bullying, LGBT bullying and other section 75 group bullying. It has to be dealt with and eradicated, not only in our schools but outside our schools.

Easter Rising Centenary: Schools

T2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Education how his Department intends to mark the forthcoming centenary of the 1916 Easter rising in schools. (AQT 2952/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. We are working in conjunction with the Executive. The Executive made the decision that the then Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure would bring forward a programme of events around the centenaries of the major events that occurred on this island from 1910 to 1915 and onwards to 1916, including the Easter rising. I am working with the Department of Education and Skills in the South on involving ourselves in a joint programme around the centenaries of the Somme and the 1916 rising. There will be a school competition in which schools will be able to enter through written work, art or drama.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister outline what consideration his Department has given to the notion of joint initiatives to mark the Easter rising of 1916 and the battle of the Somme, given that, regardless of what political perspective you come from, people across this island largely have an affinity with either one of those two significant events?

Mr O'Dowd: I am considering how we do that. We have had discussions through Question Time around the shared education initiative that has been running through schools. Here is a great opportunity for schools from different

traditions and backgrounds to learn about significant events in each other's history. They will find that it is a shared history. I think that there is an opportunity for schools to work together in and around the shared education programmes. I want to explore that further to see whether we can provide support or resources to schools to do just that.

Pupils with Special Educational Needs: Hours

T3. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Education whether there are compulsory hours for pupils with special educational needs. (AQT 2953/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have the full details in front of me. Our legislation and guidance does set down, for various parts of the curriculum, how long pupils should be in formal education. I can provide the Member with the full details of that.

Mrs Overend: I am aware, from an answer to a written question, that the number of daily compulsory hours for years 1 to 4 is three hours. For older pupils, it is four and a half hours per day. However, I am aware that special educational needs pupils are effectively being sent home when their one-to-one tuition, or support, finishes for the day. Is the Minister aware of this inequality? Is he willing to do something about that?

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member wishes to make me aware of the circumstances and instances when children are being sent home after an hour and a half, I would be very interested. I can assure the Member that if she provides me with that information, I will follow it up. I am aware that, quite recently, I answered a question from the Member on curriculum hours etc. I am more than happy to ensure that any inquiry that she comes to me about on this will be quickly and speedily followed up.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Members asking topical questions 4 and 6 have asked that their names be withdrawn. Mr John McCallister is not in his place to ask topical question 5.

Holy Trinity College, Cookstown: New Build

T7. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Holy Trinity College, Cookstown. (AQT 2957/11-16)

Mr McGlone: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo.

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. The business case is proceeding for the new build for Holy Trinity College, Cookstown. All things are moving forward as they should be and as planned in the timetable provided.

Mr McGlone: On that very point about the timetable provided, when does the Minister anticipate that build work will commence on-site?

Mr O'Dowd: It is difficult during topical questions to know the specifics of every item of business in education. I am more than happy to provide the Member with the information on that. I am not aware of any slippage with regard to Holy Trinity College. It is quite a significant investment. We have gone through the difficult parts of the development proposal; ensuring the numbers for the school and that its area plan was approved etc. I will forward more information to the Member.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Chris Lyttle is not in his place to ask topical question 8.

Minor Works Schemes: South Tyrone

T9. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the minor works schemes in south Tyrone in her constituency. (AQT 2959/11-16)

Mr O'Dowd: There is considerable pressure on minor works schemes across the sector. I am currently examining how we can alleviate that pressure on minor works. It is a direct result of a reduction to the capital budget for education. This year, it has been reduced by around 20%. I am trying to see whether we can alleviate the pressure on minor works in order to get some of the urgent projects off the ground in the Member's constituency and others.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Minister, you have touched on my supplementary question. I have been hearing concerns about a maintenance backlog in schools. Can you give more information on what you intend to do to relieve that backlog?

Mr O'Dowd: The maintenance pressure is covered by the revenue budget rather than the capital budget. I have been able to identify some flexibility in the revenue budget that will

allow me to invest a further £9 million in maintenance, bringing the total maintenance budget for this year up to £23 million. I hope that that will alleviate some, if not a significant part, of the pressure on our maintenance budget. Whether an October monitoring round goes ahead, I would like to be in a position in January to make a further bid for funds for the maintenance programme.

Lisanelly Site: School Management System

T10. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Education what thought has been given to a system of management for the six schools on the Lisanelly site, which currently operate under different management types. (AQT 2960/11-16)

Mr Hussey: The Minister, I am sure, will be aware of my listed question about the Lisanelly campus. That question will stay in the Order Paper.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will be aware that the Lisanelly site is a shared education campus. What we have been doing is working with the schools on management structures, ownership etc, and we are continuing to work our way through that process. It will be complicated, but ensuring that we put in place a structure that all the schools on the site are comfortable with is certainly achievable.

Mr Hussey: The Minister touched on my supplementary question when he referred to the ownership of the buildings. Will ownership of the buildings being provided by the state remain with the state? Alternatively, will the sale of the sites be used to subsidise the building works?

Mr O'Dowd: Those are connected but slightly separate questions. As I say, we are working our way through all those issues. For the sites that schools will be vacating, I imagine that the normal process will fall into place, with the Department seeking to ensure, or going through the process of ensuring, that any investment by the Department that can be retrieved is retrieved and that those revenues are then returned to DFP. That does not exclude there being discussions, debate and conclusions on the management and ownership of the schools on the new site.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of topical questions to the Minister of Education.

Private Members' Business

Autism

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly expresses concern over the waiting times for children for autism and special educational needs assessments; notes that 'The Prevalence of Autism (including Asperger's Syndrome) in School Age Children in Northern Ireland 2015' report, published in July 2015, shows that the estimated prevalence of autism has increased; recognises that delays in diagnosis are resulting in children with special educational needs being denied access to the extra educational support they need; further notes the importance of early intervention for educational and social development for these children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work collaboratively with the Minister of Education and his arm's-length bodies to invest fully in and streamline services to deal with the backlog. — [Mr D Bradley.]

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the opportunity this afternoon to support the motion on the problems associated with autism and, indeed, to express my deep disappointment that, following the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, very little progress has been made.

I declare to the Assembly that I have been a long-standing member of the all-party group on autism and have a fair knowledge of the problems experienced by people with autism and their families. It has been a long and arduous campaign, which really started as far back as 2001 — some 14 years ago. I wholeheartedly congratulate the officers and volunteers from Autism NI, our all-party group on autism, led by its chair, Dominic Bradley, and others for their perseverance and success, despite opposition at the highest level right here in the Northern Ireland Assembly and in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The whole idea of the legislation was to ensure that people with autism had access to equality in the same way as everyone else in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, to date, to the eternal shame of the Department of Education alongside the Department of Health, many aspects of the Autism Act have fallen far short of expectations.

It would appear that the Act has been breached in a number of areas, at which I have to

express my total and absolute disgust. I have questions to ask. Where are the six steps to autism? Where is the autism awareness campaign? Where is the necessary extra funding for autism? What is happening to the ever-increasing waiting lists? Those are all questions that the Department needs to answer, and answer rather quickly, remembering that the Autism Act came into being way back in 2011.

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

It is most unfortunate but a sad reality of the situation with autism that the number of children with the condition continues to increase and that parents and guardians continue to be exasperated because of the long delay in getting a diagnosis and putting in place remedies to get the best possible result and outcomes for all concerned.

This anomaly applies to the Health Department and the Education Department and, indeed, other Departments and everyone in positions of authority. They must listen to the deliberations from the Assembly today and to the Members who have spoken and will speak, and they must pull out all the stops to ensure the delivery of a much-improved service.

3.30 pm

The one thing that really annoys me as an Assembly Member is that, when I listen to the cries for help from so many families when they are told that their child — in some cases more than one child — has autism, I am not in a position to give definitive answers as to what happens next. The Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 should be the catalyst for directions to parents and guardians who need help and assistance at a very important time in the life of that child.

The autism strategy and action plan was introduced to the Assembly on 14 January 2014, and contained in that document were many positive ideas and pathways aimed at better awareness of the way forward for the child and its parents. I am not so sure, some 18 months later, that parents know where to go for help and assistance. It is my understanding that, while schools, their principals and teachers, are totally committed to giving the best service to all children who have autism, they continue to be restricted because of the lack of funding and classroom support. That really must be tackled and answers provided as soon as possible.

I am again disgusted that no Health Minister has presented themselves in the Chamber today to hear the heartfelt appeals by all Assembly Members. It is exactly the same as it was last week on the disgusting waiting lists and yesterday on cancer treatment for so many sick people who continue to live in pain and agony. The Assembly, through its Health Minister, shirks its duty and leaves people to their suffering. The Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 was hard-won by the efforts of so many people. I commend the many autism groups set up across Northern Ireland to help local people find the way forward. Let the officials in all Departments and the Assembly get to work immediately to implement, at the earliest possible date, the contents of the 2011 Act for the betterment of everyone with autism and their families.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer of the motion for bringing it to the House today. Much of the discussion today has centred on waiting times for assessment and the frustrations met by all involved, including children, parents and schools. I want to focus a bit wider on the overall system and the bureaucracy that still exists in the system and the process.

In the ministerial statement of 14 January 2014 on the autism strategy and action plan, the then Minister Poots outlined that there needed to be the coherent, cross-departmental development of an inclusive framework and an Executive commitment to improve the services that are provided to children and young people and to parents, carers and families who are living with autism. First, I commend all those involved in the hard work to bring the strategy forward. However, along with parents, I am concerned that the recommendations in that strategy are not being thoroughly developed and implemented through the Department and that the outcomes have not necessarily impacted on the ground.

The statement indicated that the regional coordinator would report to the interdepartmental senior officials group, which, in turn, would report to the Minister who would:

"lay a monitoring report on the implementation of the strategy before the Assembly at least every three years." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p312, col 2.]

That still leaves layers of bureaucracy. In my opinion and that of parents, reporting should be viewed at least every 12 months in order to continue to look at the gaps therein. As the

prevalence of autism report indicates, children in the least and most deprived areas appear to have the highest incidence rate of ASD across all school years. That has increased between 2009-2010 and 2014-15, with the greatest rise in numbers of children with ASD in the youngest years — 5- to 8-year-olds — and among older children — 13- to 16-year-olds. All that indicates that waiting lists for assessments will get longer and longer on top of the logjam that is there already.

The five-stage process of identifying needs assessments must be replaced by a less bureaucratic and more straightforward assessment. That would be a better model and may be less bureaucratic, but it has to have the mechanisms in it to at least reduce waiting times for assessments. We all know that early identification of need is key to making any progress. Earlier assessment and intervention is paramount in enabling children to reach their potential. If children and young people are not having their needs met promptly, that can lead to long-term and extensive interventions at a later stage in a child's education.

In many of our schools and nurseries, there is a clear consensus among principals, teachers, classroom assistants, SENCOs and governors that further training and development for teachers and support staff should continue to be rolled out. All schools need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to successfully manage the needs of children with autism, Asperger's, special educational needs and disability. Schools also need the capacity and expertise to take on the extra responsibilities that come with the growing demand and the increase in the number of children with ASD and Asperger's. Teachers, along with the healthcare professionals, need time to build capacity for that.

It is time that we moved forward with the SEND Bill, and I am aware that it is at Committee Stage. It is time that the Health Minister got back to his desk to take responsibility for the issue. The multidisciplinary teams in Health and Education, which are the two lead Departments for this, and their officials need to continue to engage with those involved in meeting the needs of children across the sectors, not just to address the waiting times but to make further investment to deal with the backlog. That is crucial for achieving a successful educational outcome for children with SEN.

I pay tribute to all groups and organisations that work with families and communities to empower children and young people with SEN to actively

engage in opportunities and to live an active and full life —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): Bring your remarks to a close.

Ms Boyle: — like the organisation called Sands, in my home town, that does tremendous work. I support the motion.

Mr McKinney: As SDLP health spokesperson and a South Belfast MLA, I am privileged that my party has tabled today's motion. I am hopeful that the Minister of Education and the absentee Simon Hamilton will take heed of today's debate, as it is a very important issue. It is so important, in fact, that we have launched an online petition that is reflecting on the Minister's absence and urging him to get back to work. It was launched a couple of hours ago, and 200 people have already responded. The nature of the petition is that they can also leave responses. Patricia O'Neill from Newtownabbey describes it as "outrageous". Terry Ruddy from Newry says:

"We need all ministers at Stormont at their desks and working for all the [people] of Northern Ireland".

Connor Duncan from Rasharkin says:

"We deserve a full time health minister ... delivering for our doctors and staff".

That gives you an indication of the strength of opinion out there around the issue. People are reporting live, if you like, on their anxiety and annoyance at the present situation and the ignoring of this very important debate, which all the people who have turned up in the Chamber agree is one that needs action now.

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability, and it affects how a person communicates and makes sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, so, while all children and young people affected share certain difficulties around social communication and interaction, it affects them all in different ways. That is why diagnosis is so important for special educational needs provision. As already noted by Members who spoke previously and went through some of the statistics, diagnosis of ASD in schools has risen dramatically in recent years from just under 4,000 in 2009-2010 to over 6,000 last year. That represents a prevalence rate of some 2.2%. I have no doubt that increasing awareness has led to that but also that increasing levels of diagnosis have played a key role. In that context, we must recognise the

important and professional role that professionals such as educational psychologists play in this. We must also recognise the extreme pressure that they are under as the numbers increase but the wider financial provision for them does not match demand.

There are over 1,300 children on waiting lists for autism diagnosis to receive the extra help and care that they need. The diagnosis forms an important component of the overall statementing process, and its failure is failing children, their parents and all of us. My constituency office in South Belfast, for example, has been inundated with parents who are facing significant delays. The mother of Adam, a boy of eight, contacted the office in June, well ahead of the academic term, and he has been waiting now for six months for an appointment. His mother is desperate to make sure that her son receives the help that he needs in primary school. He has still not been assessed and is still attending a mainstream school, and the current situation, in her words, is "tearing her family apart". That is not an isolated incident. Parents of children with autism are rapidly losing confidence in the Education Authority and the health system to provide statutory statements. We need to do something to resolve the situation immediately. The suggestion of a formal needs assessment and a formal process between the two Departments is welcome. It is clear that proper funding and joined-up government is also needed to address the issue fully. A properly funded cross-departmental focus is paramount in improving their quality of life while ensuring that these children receive an education on an equitable basis so that they can go into further education or otherwise lead a productive working life.

There are many people in community and voluntary groups who are doing all that they can to support struggling parents. I have been particularly impressed by PEAT NI. There are other groups in south Belfast that are looking after small constituencies of 20 or 25 families with children who have autism. It is groups like these that often go unrecognised, and they have told me that the Education Authority and the Health Department are failing to ensure that they get adequate provision, which leads them to take their own actions, which can sometimes mitigate but would be much improved if the Department and the Government were to listen.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank those who tabled this important motion, and I am delighted to speak on it. I am disappointed that a Sinn

Féin amendment about empowering the Health and Education Departments to go further under a duty to cooperate was not accepted. That would have strengthened the motion, but perhaps that is for a different day.

At the outset, I congratulate all the volunteers, families, educational psychologists and, indeed, anybody who works on or suffers with this issue day and daily. I have no doubt that communication on the issue fills up a lot of our inboxes here. I am not sure what the Health Minister is doing today; he could be at home playing his PlayStation or he might be in his constituency office doing a bit of work. If he is in his constituency office, issues of autism and dealing with its effects will no doubt be in his inbox also. As some Members touched on, it is hugely regrettable that we do not have a Health Minister here today to perhaps reflect on the autism strategy of January 2014 and maybe give a bit of information on the targets and successes and what have been the failings of that strategy. They are plentiful. We could have reflected on the road ahead. He is not just letting down the DUP or those of us here today; he is letting down all of the families at home who have to deal with autism daily. Again, I join colleagues who have said that it is hugely regrettable and a shame that the Health Minister is not here today.

3.45 pm

In recent months, there have been a couple of Bills going through the House that will help to alleviate some of the problems that we have been talking about. We have only to look at the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill that has been going through the Committee, as the Deputy Chair, Sandra Overend, mentioned. We finish our consideration of that Bill tomorrow. It presents great opportunities to streamline the process to give back to families, parents and schools a wee bit of power so that we can again prioritise the individual child or pupil over the interests of institutions. For too long, that is how it has been.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. I certainly welcome the benefits of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, but does he not find it regrettable, given the amendment that his party tried to submit, that it is a Bill of the Department of Education and not of the Executive?

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Minister of Education has gone on record as saying this, and my Sinn Féin colleagues on the Committee and I agree,

that we would be more than happy to explore the potential for a duty for the two Departments to formally cooperate. I know that the Member's private Member's Bill, which I will come on to in a second, includes such a duty. That would be a huge success. Rather than just having it on paper, I would go a wee bit further in scoping out the success of such a duty. Maybe a joint task force between the two Departments could be immediately established to look at the areas where this would be applicable and where we would have the early successes. The establishment will want to keep the status quo and say, "No, this is not going to help. This is going to be just a hindrance to what we do." However, families at home need to see something like this happen.

I very much welcome the Member's Bill. I think that it is timely and that it will go a long way. The enabling power for the pooling of resources and the sharing of funds is hugely important. We know only too well the huge impact that Tory austerity is having on our budgets here in the Assembly. In times of austerity, it is hugely important that we do more with the public purse. Any ability to pool resources will be hugely beneficial in the years ahead.

Another big strength of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill will be the ability of schools to improve their capacity to deliver. I would like that to be enhanced in the trusts as well. Another issue that I would like to touch on — it may be a wider thing that we need to look at in the future — is the statement. To me, the statement is still not owned by the pupil; it is still too closely linked to the institutions. I would love to break free from that and have the statement follow pupils through their school life. It is wrong that it is linked to the institution.

I will give a word of warning. We have touched today on shortening the time frames of these processes. Of course, one unintended consequence of that could be that we shorten the time allowed to a family to retrieve complex information that may be vital when it comes to an appeal or a process. I would like a wee bit of flexibility built into the system to allow a family that wee bit of time, if they want it, to get information for the statementing process or an appeal. I hope and think that the Committee will look at something like that. The theme has to be the duty for the Departments of Health and Education to cooperate and work together. We really need to look at that.

Before I finish, I will say a word on the success of Middletown Centre for Autism, which has gone from strength to strength and got a very good inspection report recently. There are

some good things out there. As some of my colleagues mentioned, the bureaucracy around some of these things is stifling, and families know that only too well. Hopefully, with the SEND Bill, the Children's Services Co-operation Bill and various other reforms coming down the line, we will start to see improvements. However, it is hugely regrettable that the Health Minister is not here to explain to us how some of this looks from his side.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as a member of the Health Committee, my party's health spokesperson and a former member of the Education Committee. From looking at the systems in place for our most vulnerable children, it is crystal clear that, year on year, there is a total lack of a joined-up approach to providing appropriate care to children with autism, especially Asperger's. The Health Department and the Education Department, along with the Education Authority and the health trusts, need to start working together. As we know, that simply is not happening, and our young people are being let down as a result. It is a total disgrace that so many parents are forced to fight so hard for school-based care for their children. Very often, when they finally get through the process, it is too late as their children have advanced. Many vulnerable children have advanced despite the system rather than as a result of it.

Parents feel trapped into paying for extra support privately and are left wondering how their child's development could have been much better if they had just received the right support in the first place. They are parents who only want the best care at school for the children whom they love and care for at home. They are shouldering a burden that should be helped and not hindered by the responsible Departments and their policies.

Both Ministers will be aware that, at a constituency level, I have been involved in helping local parents who feel totally let down. The processes take far too long, leaving behind uncertainty, which, in itself, can have, and has had, a profound effect on children who cannot cope easily with change or who require additional dedicated support that simply is not being put in place.

The Education Minister will also be aware of the provision that has been fought hard for at St Mary's Primary School in Banbridge. The sad fact of that case was that by the time the support and care was discussed, agreed and eventually begun to be put in place, it was too late for the child for whom the original request

was raised. That is totally unacceptable. That is the nub of the problem with autism provision for our children. The procedural wheels grind far too slowly, and parents and their children are frustrated at every turn. It is not the fantastic teaching staff or carers; it is the processes and procedures that they are forced to operate by. Those have led directly to a considerable backlog and are failing and letting down a generation of vulnerable children both now and in their later life.

I support the motion's reference, therefore, to the increasing number of children diagnosed with autism and the difficulties that they experience in receiving the vital extra support that they so urgently need. That is exactly the experience that many of our constituents are dealing with every single day. I therefore support the motion.

Mr Allister: I commend the sponsors of the motion for bringing this important subject to the House, and I compliment Mr Bradley on his work in leading the all-party group on autism. This is an issue that many of us, as constituency Members, are discovering is a far more deep-seated and widespread issue than we had ever realised. In my five years running a constituency office as a Member of this House, I have noticed an increasing volume of parents disaffected by the treatment or lack of assistance that they have been getting in the education system and, indeed, in the health system, in respect of kids on the very wide spectrum of autism, which is excessively wide indeed. The tragedy is that, in years gone by, many of those kids, who, with the right treatment and support, can do quite well, and the same goes for kids with dyslexia, were simply written off as stupid, which was neither fair then nor fair now. That which can be done we most certainly need to do.

The primary point that I want to make in the debate is the great disparity in facilities across the Province. There is something of a postcode lottery because I asked the sometimes Health Minister some questions about autism, and we talked this morning about the scandalous delays that some 900 people are waiting beyond the promised 13 weeks, and some have been waiting for a year. A contributor to that is to establish where the clinicians are located who can deal with those referrals.

I was amazed to discover, in this answer from Mr Hamilton, that, although the Northern is the largest health and social care trust in Northern Ireland, it has only 11 of the total of 68 clinicians trained to diagnose autism, whereas the Southern Trust has 23. A third of the total

number of clinicians are in the Southern Trust but, in Belfast, there are only 11, in the Northern, 11, in the South Eastern, only nine, and in the Western, only 14. Without equality of distribution of clinicians to diagnose autism, the postcode lottery kicks in. That is why, in the northern area — relating this to education — when the North Eastern Education and Library Board existed, it advised me that, in the year 2012-13 for example, there was a total of 456 requests for statements in respect of those who were believed to be suffering from autism.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr McKinney: Does the Member agree that, in some cases, this could amount to individual trusts abdicating responsibility for dealing with these issues, and that it has a further effect because it leads to lengthening queues in neighbouring trust areas and causes further frustration for those involved?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Allister: The Member may well be right, but one thing is very clear. When you examine the figures for people who, for example, seek a statement in respect of educational needs, you find that the success rate for those who come with referral from the medical experts — the clinicians — is far greater than for those who come with a referral simply from the school. It is quite clear that you need the support of a clinician to give your child in the best possible chance of obtaining a statement. If there is a dearth of clinicians, then you are waiting longer to get to that point. Maybe a whole school year could be lost for that child which, at that tender age, is a vital component in the ability of that child to catch up and perform to the optimum of their potential.

What perhaps distressed me most about the answer from the sometime Minister is that, having acknowledged the dearth of clinicians and said in the answer that,

"The current number of clinicians trained to diagnose autism is not sufficient to meet overall demand",

he goes on to finish the answer by saying that

"given the current financial constraints no further investment has been identified to meet this need".

The sometimes Minister knows of the problem and its ramifications and yet, plugging the gap that obviously exists is not a priority. In particular — for someone who represents an area covered by the Northern Trust — it is a priority to bring some equality of opportunity to that area, and others that are affected, to make sure that there are enough trained clinicians to diagnose, because that is the starting point for the treatment of any of these children.

Ms Hanna: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, and I commend my colleague Dominic Bradley, in particular, for his efforts, through the all-party group on autism and outside it, in promoting awareness of this topic. The fruit of his labour was the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which came through the Assembly and brought together all of the most progressive elements of legislation across the islands. We cannot overstate how groundbreaking that was, and how important it was for 30,000 people in Northern Ireland with autism, their families and carers, in ensuring that they have access to the full range of services they require throughout their lives.

The feedback I have had on this is that it made a great difference in raising the level of understanding for families, in particular those with young children with autism. I see that, even on hand dryers, there are signs warning about the noise, and I understand that this is to raise awareness of the impact that some sensory issues might have on young people with autism. That understanding is vital for parents and families as they try to navigate the challenges of everyday life.

4.00 pm

I commend Dominic and also my colleagues Fearghal and Seán for tabling the motion and looking at the health and education aspects, and, in particular, for raising awareness of the worrying wait for assessment that people are enduring. Just before the recess, the Health Department published its statistics on autism, which showed that 682 children had been referred for an ASD assessment in that quarter and that 407 assessments were completed. It would appear from just looking at the figures that that rolling figure of 250 is not being picked up per quarter and that those numbers are accruing in every quarter.

Members may have seen the statistics in 'The Prevalence of Autism (including Asperger's Syndrome) in School Age Children in Northern Ireland 2015'. They show an increase of 0.9% across all health and social care trusts and of

up to 2% in the school-age population. In very real terms, that meant that we have gone up 67% in the number of children identified with autism spectrum disorders from 2009 to 2015. It is natural that we would see some increase through the greater provision of services and through awareness, and the Member who spoke before me referred to the understanding of things that maybe were not diagnosed and, as a result, put down to other issues.

I think that the understanding and awareness that we have needs to be matched with investment in services, and that does not appear to be the case. Groups such as Autism NI and the National Autistic Society have voiced their concerns about the waiting times for diagnosis and the failure of the services that follow assessment. They polled parents on the length of waiting times, and, as Members have said, 70% of parents have been waiting for a diagnosis, with a third of those having waited for more than a year. In my own health trust, two thirds of children have been waiting over 18 weeks and a considerable number for more than a year. That is a year of families frantically googling and trying to piece together the information that they need and their not having access to, and not being formally referred to, the services that can improve their quality of life. To say that that is challenging for those families is an understatement.

The figures are a cause for concern for parents. We need to understand the impact that that diagnosis, or even your child potentially having autism, has, and every Member will have stories coming into their constituency office. Therefore, to be told, "We think that there is a problem with your child", and then to delay for a year being able to get the statement and the service that they need has to end.

I support the motion and ask that all Members lend support to it as well. I hope that the Health Minister does come back to work and works with the relevant Departments to streamline the services for people with autism and their families.

Mr Agnew: Over the last number of years, I have highlighted the poor performance and the delays in diagnosis for children with autism or other special educational needs in the south-eastern region. Mr Allister has brought figures today to show that the south-eastern region has the smallest number of clinicians qualified to diagnose autism. Behind the figures is the wasted potential, or at least the risk of wasted potential, on a day when we hear of yet another report being released about educational underachievement. I think that this is at the

crux of that issue. The early diagnosis of, and early intervention in, conditions such as autism is essential to ensuring that every child meets his or her full potential.

Language is very often important in these debates, and I know that ASD — autistic spectrum disorder — is a current term of usage in the health service, but I also know that a number of people with autism would object to the term "disorder", preferring "autistic spectrum condition" or simply "autistic", because, of course, although people with autism are not what we would call neurotypical, we do not want to assume that it is a form of disease or disorder to be treated. Indeed, many celebrated people throughout our society and some notable names — Einstein, Mozart and, more contemporarily, Tim Burton — are often viewed as people with autism who have made a tremendous contribution to our society. I think that each one of us will know people in our own life.

You do not have to be famous to be brilliant or to contribute to society. In everyday life, I know personally a number of people with autism whose condition gives them abilities and skills that can be admired. We have to ensure that we put supports in place at an early age to ensure the potential that exists in all children, whether autistic or otherwise, to achieve and to contribute to society. We must ensure that we do not waste that potential.

I made reference, in my previous intervention, to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill, as I have concerns that something that is so cross-departmental is coming from one Department. An earlier strategy, the draft early years strategy, was the genesis of my private Member's Bill to require cooperation between Departments. This is exactly the type of area where that kind of cooperation is, in my view, essential. We should have an Executive Bill on special educational needs; it has to be across Health and Education. Indeed, we should be bemoaning not only the fact that we do not have the Health Minister here today but the fact that the Education Minister is not here to hear the debate, as he was explicitly mentioned in the motion. If one is not available or is choosing not to be in post at this time, perhaps another Minister could step forward for children and those with autism.

I have seen some good practice. Diagnosis is important, and it is essential in ensuring that the necessary supports are put in place, but we have to assume now, with the increased levels of knowledge around autism, that there is a child with autism in every school class. In my

son's school, Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, many of the teaching aids that would be used for a child with autism are being used for the whole class, because the methods of teaching are valid regardless of whether a child has autism or not. We need to start from the basis of assuming that there is an autistic child or autistic children in every class and putting those supports in place.

That does not get away from the need for diagnosis, which will ensure that not just the educational provisions but the health provisions and, if necessary, the support for families at home are put in place, and that the resources are directed towards the child and the family. This work needs to be cross-departmental for us to get it right. I hope that my private Member's Bill to require a duty on government to cooperate will help in that regard and that we can start to tackle the historical problem of delays in diagnosis for autism.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the opportunity to wind on the debate and reflect the concerns outlined by my colleagues and by the House as a whole.

At the outset, I would like to acknowledge the great work that the Middletown Centre does on autism; but, first, I want to comment on the educational aspect of treating a child with autism. I am aware, as an educational spokesperson, of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Bill that many other Members have spoken of today and that is making its way through the House. I hope that that Bill can in some way help with some of the broader educational deficiencies associated with special educational needs and autism in particular.

Many people have quoted statistics today. It is estimated that over 3,500 children of school age and over 20,000 adults in Northern Ireland have autism. These statistics are crucial, as professionals and researchers agree that early intervention and diagnosis is essential to improving the developmental and educational outcomes of children with autism.

Many Members have also referenced the autism strategy, which states that education should:

"Continue to build capacity in schools to effectively meet the needs of children and young people with autism;"

There are multiple issues that arise when considering this point. Can we say that, currently, our capacity for dealing with special educational needs in our schools is appropriate

and fitting? We cannot. In fact, in many rural schools with a small number of children, there is under-provision. I am aware of situations where a school has been allocated eight hours a year in which to see an educational psychologist. How does that address the special educational needs of a school that has 70 or 80 children? That is outside the spectrum of Health, of course, as those assessments are provided by the Education Authority. How can children benefit in a tangible way with so little help?

The second point is to:

"Provide effective support to parents and carers of children and young people with autism to ensure they are involved and informed regarding their child/children's education;"

Parents need to be supported through the diagnosis and the subsequent process for children and young people with autism. That comes not just through Health and Social Care but, crucially, through the school. We need to make sure that all teachers and classroom assistants have cognisance of the challenges facing them and that they always act with the best interests of the child at heart.

The third and fourth points are to:

*"Formalise collaboration between health and social care and education sector to help improve support, including specialist support; and
4. Expand trans-disciplinary assessments, interventions and support for children and young people with complex needs."*

That is particularly important. The issue cannot be tackled by either Health or Education alone. It needs the joint approach that will be necessary to drive down waiting lists and promote early intervention when educating and caring for the child with autism.

Furthermore, as reflected in today's debate, funding is a key issue in driving the autism strategy, along with the broader special educational needs legislation that I hope to see passed this year.

I thank Members for their contributions today. As Chair of the all-party group and a strong advocate for autism, Dominic stressed the need for a cross-departmental approach. He said that it was a development disability and that we needed joined-up work. He said that we need equality for all our children; a child with autism should have the same access to the whole

education system as any other child. He put a strong emphasis on early intervention, diagnosis and statementing.

Many Members spoke about the Minister. Again, as with the debate on cancer services yesterday, we have no Minister across the Chamber. That is a real shame for the children with autism, a real shame for the waiting lists and a real shame for the parents out there. We need somebody at the helm.

I agree with Maeve McLaughlin, who said that we need a more formal duty between Health and Education to address special educational needs. Maeve said that clause 4 needed to be much stronger. She said that much of the delay lay at the door of Health, but there is certainly a big delay with Education as well. She also quoted many statistics. Many people talked about a six-month delay or a year's delay. Think of what that means to a four- or five-year-old child. It might be six months or a year in their chronological age, but what about their educational development and their educational attainment? What is lost during that time? Maybe two years or longer. It may be something that they will have great difficulty ever catching up on.

Like all MLAs here, Sandra Overend, the vice-Chairperson of the Committee, is inundated with complaints from frustrated parents. She talked about the wonderful protocols, but those wonderful protocols are not borne out in reality. Two or three parents arrive at her door every week, and the parents' stress is stress for the children.

Kieran McCarthy, who is a long-standing member of the all-party working group, rightly congratulated the work of Autism Northern Ireland. At this stage, I want to refer to the Autism Act, because a lot of people mentioned the Autism Act today. When the all-party group met today, it stressed that two very important parts of the Autism Act never got anywhere — an advocate for autism and an autism budget. There is no independent scrutiny of the Autism Act, and there is no separate budget; it depends on money from the learning disability budget.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. The Autism Act 2011 was very important but, at that time, the Department was against it. Do you agree that this would be an opportune time for the Department to do something about the speeches that were made today to prove that it is now on board with the Autism Act once and for all?

Mr Rogers: I agree wholeheartedly with Kieran. We are sending out a united message that we really need the Department to act. If we were to compare services pre and post legislation, I think it would be very interesting. I think we would know what the answer was. With limited finance from the learning disability budget and an increasing number of children with autism, 70% are waiting for over a year. How good is that in the modern age? It is notable too that much of the innovation and development work that has been done around autism has come from the voluntary sector. The statutory side is very much lagging behind in that developmental work.

4.15 pm

Michaela Boyle focused on the associated bureaucracy. Whether that is the teacher in the school or the parent, they are just so frustrated with the amount of bureaucracy. She also said that recommendations are not being thoroughly implemented. There need to be evaluations. Having an evaluation or review every three years? No use. It needs to be at least every year. She also stressed that we need a mechanism to reduce the waiting times. She said that further training and development is necessary for our teaching and support staff, which I agree with.

My colleague Fearghal talked about autism as a developmental disability. Diagnosis is key. Without diagnosis, we cannot have early intervention. If that diagnosis and getting those appointments is going to take a year, what is happening inside that child's mind? The parents have frustration as well. He also mentioned the damning statistic. He spoke about a child in his constituency named Adam, who waited six months for an appointment before anything could be addressed. He used the words, "tearing her family apart". We could think of our own children and our own families. Let us get into the shoes of those parents. Really tearing the whole thing apart — totally frustrated.

Chris Hazzard talked about empowering both Departments to provide a duty of care. That is coming across very strongly from a lot of people. It is very regrettable that we do not have a Health Minister here today. It would also have been useful to have our Education Minister here. He holds out hope for the SEND Bill. The pooling of resources and sharing of funds will be very important. He made a very relevant point about a statement following the pupil, I would say irrespective of where they go, because, very often, our post-primary children decide at 16 that maybe the best place to go is

a further education college. There is a different set of provisions altogether within a further education college. If the statement followed the child, it would be very appropriate.

Jo-Anne Dobson talked about the total lack of a joined-up approach. Parents want the best for their child, just as I want the best for my children. Parents are totally exasperated about the whole situation. The process just grinds far too slowly. We are letting down a generation of children.

Jim Allister said that, if there was the right intervention, every child could do well. He talked about the great disparity between the different boards, the level of intervention and so on. I will take one example —

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

Mr Rogers: Claire Hanna quoted the damning statistic as well. Finally, I would like to thank everybody for their contribution. I think there is a message going out from around the House to the Minister today that autism needs to be addressed properly and quickly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern over the waiting times for children for autism and special educational needs assessments; notes that 'The Prevalence of Autism (including Asperger's Syndrome) in School Age Children in Northern Ireland 2015' report, published in July 2015, shows that the estimated prevalence of autism has increased; recognises that delays in diagnosis are resulting in children with special educational needs being denied access to the extra educational support they need; further notes the importance of early intervention for educational and social development for these children; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to work collaboratively with the Minister of Education and his arm's-length bodies to invest fully in and streamline services to deal with the backlog.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Housing: Spatial Planning to Meet the Demand in Carrickmore

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat): The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes and all other Members who are called to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm go bhfuil seans agam an díospóireacht seo a chur chun tosaigh inniu. I thank the Deputy Speaker for calling this debate. I tabled the topic because it is a very important local issue in my home community of Carrickmore in County Tyrone in the constituency of West Tyrone.

At the outset, I welcome the attendance of the Environment Minister, Mark H Durkan, whose Department has overall responsibility for planning. I also want to acknowledge that my party colleague Councillor Barry McNally, who has a strong local interest in the matter, is in attendance for the debate.

The debate is about the lack of available land in Carrickmore to meet the housing needs of the community and anyone else who might wish to live in the area at this time. In truth, it is more about people than land, but the two are interconnected in the debate because an impasse, a kind of stalemate, has developed: a significant number of people would like to buy a house or a site — ie land — to develop housing but are being hampered by the lack of available land and suitable properties. A phrase used locally about housing in the area is that "Nothing is moving". The fact of the matter is that young people are forced to take up residence elsewhere. People who retain a strong Carrickmore identity find themselves in the situation of having to go elsewhere to live. I am aware of a good number of young people who have emigrated from the area and whose desire it is to come home. They are regularly checking the availability of housing stock in Carrickmore to buy or rent.

Carrickmore is a strong, vital community. It is designated as a local town in the Omagh district, is described as an important market and service centre for its rural hinterland and has two schools. St Columbkille's Primary School

on Creggan Road has a strong nursery and Irish-medium unit, and it has in excess of 300 pupils — I think that the figure is around 320. Dean Maguirc College, which is located on Termon Road, is a co-educational school that caters for pupils of all levels of ability, and its current enrolment is 509. Bear in mind that local pupils also attend schools in parts of Tyrone, depending on the sector, Irish-medium provision etc. Both local schools received recognition of their excellence in recent Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspections.

Carrickmore has a significant health and primary care centre, with patient numbers of 9,000. There are a number of other main employers — the two schools and the health centre are employers — in the areas of construction, agri-supplies and a whole range of businesses, some of which are accommodated at the Techno Tyrone business park in the Milestone Centre.

The Patrician is an excellent community centre. More than that, it is a recognised theatre and a venue for concerts and all kinds of entertainment and community events. The voluntary sector in Carrickmore is very strong across the spectrum, from the Friendly Care Group to all manifestations of the GAA and other sports, including boxing and Special Olympians. There are very many strong community groups in Carrickmore, including the Friendly Care Group that I mentioned and the Rainbow Gateway Club. A vision is being developed in the community for a multisports centre.

I provide this community message because it is relevant to the vitality of the community and the lack of movement in housing. When mentioning Dean Maguirc College and St Columbkille's Primary School, I should put on record that new builds are required for both, as the Department of Education has acknowledged. They are subject, of course, to available funding, but there is an absolute need there. There are also short-term accommodation needs. Similarly, the health centre requires a new build.

There are multiple reasons for the associated matter of the lack of availability of housing at this time. A combination of circumstances has resulted in local demand outstripping supply.

I refer to the Omagh area plan 1987-2002. That area plan, of course, is out of date, but my understanding is that the settlement limits for Carrickmore are still extant. That dates back 28 years, and that is where its outdatedness

comes into the equation. It is almost impossible to access a copy of the Omagh area plan, either online or in hard copy. It is like something that has been stored away in a museum, because it is very difficult to access. I have a copy of the relevant section of the Omagh area plan for Carrickmore. It is a bit of an achievement in itself to have that physical document in my left hand.

A concept called the west Tyrone area plan 2019 superseded the Omagh area plan. Initial findings were that that lacked detail for Carrickmore, as you might expect. That is now to be superseded by the local development plan for Carrickmore, which, following RPA, will be taken forward by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. I emphasise that that local development plan simply needs to respond to the specific circumstances of various settlements. Today, I am placing the focus on Carrickmore.

I stand to be corrected by the Minister, but it is my understanding that zoned land for housing development in the Carrickmore area, as defined in the Omagh area plan, amounts to 10.3 hectares. That was identified in 1987, all of 28 years ago. A small amount of that land saw small-scale development around 20 years ago, but the majority is underdeveloped. Planners might rightly ask why no development is taking place on the land that they have zoned for housing, and there are a number of answers to that question. One is that some of the land is unreachable and under the control of banks. Another reason — local knowledge tells you this — is that it simply will not be developed for housing.

A number of new sites in convenient locations, perhaps on the periphery of the existing settlement, are needed. Those would support the provision of a range of house types for different housing needs in Carrickmore at this time. Obviously, crucial work needs to be done in the local development plan to bring that about, working in partnership with the local community.

I have taken a number of initiatives at a local level. One of those was to consult locally in late May on the housing shortage and to identify the level of need in the community. I met representatives of the Rural Housing Association, and we talked about making the call for a proper, thorough — I emphasise the word "thorough" — housing needs survey to be carried out by the Housing Executive.

The business of the Housing Executive is to identify need, not just for social housing but for

all types of housing. The Housing Executive has advised the Department for Social Development that there is no requirement for the provision of new social housing in the Omagh district area. Based on local knowledge, that is not so and is not reliable. I am not talking about social housing solely but private housing and co-ownership-type housing.

A range of housing options needs to be developed for the community and to meet community demand.

4.30 pm

To its credit, the Rural Housing Association has told me that it is open for business. I have tried to engage other housing associations, notably Fold, and have not had any response whatsoever. I have tried on a number of occasions, by telephone and email, to secure engagement from Fold, but have not even had the courtesy of a reply. I will continue to pursue that avenue. However, I also met a planning officer who works with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council for a preliminary conversation about this — a lady called Hilda Clements. I thank her for providing a listening ear and engaging with me as to the issues at this time. Of course, no commitments were made but, at the same time, in a preliminary way, I wanted a key planning officer in this process to at least understand the context, the problems and the particular nature of the difficulty that we face in Carrickmore. I will continue to work with all relevant players to build that evidence base.

I will refer briefly to planning policy in respect of development in the countryside. Carrickmore is obviously a small local town with a rural hinterland. There are not enough opportunities in the rural hinterland for people to build at this time either. I know that that will, hopefully, be addressed as a result of the single planning policy statement, and perhaps through additional flexibilities that are being offered to local councils to interpret that. I thank the Department of Environment planning policy division officials and the Minister for a good bit of engagement in recent months around that issue.

However, I am particularly concerned about one issue within what may typically be called planning policy statement (PPS) 21. I have two specific files with me today that are going nowhere other than back into my briefcase, but they are to remind me about this definition of "personal ... circumstances". I am told that if someone is applying for planning permission in the countryside — outside of infill opportunities,

farming justification etc — one of the remote possibilities of it being granted is personal and social circumstances.

I have two files of local families who have particular circumstances. In one case, where there was a refusal, we are talking about the applicant trying to provide care for not one, not two but three family members, and that was not regarded by Planning Service as "compelling". Some sort of impossible test is being set for compelling circumstances.

Last weekend, Councillor McNally and I visited another family in the Carrickmore area whose planning application is being processed. Again, there are compelling social circumstances and health circumstances. However, I fear that the application will not meet the test of being described as compelling. It may be urgent, but there is some fine line between urgent and compelling that only the planners understand. I throw that in at the end of my contribution because this is really about people. It is about land —

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

Mr McElduff: Of course it is about land, but really this is about people, and in Carrickmore there is a particular circumstance that requires a housing strategy and goodwill from different Departments, including DOE.

Mr Byrne: I rise to support Mr McElduff in bringing forward the Adjournment debate on Carrickmore. Carrickmore, of course, means "the big rock", and it is a place of strong community spirit and strong individuals who have overcome many an adversity in the past. It is a viable town where you have three filling stations and three very good supermarkets. As Mr McElduff said, we have the local Milestone enterprise company. The late Michael Harte, who owned the chemist's shop, Jim Maguire and John Hadden were the three men who drove that forward. They created a local enterprise centre of very successful proportions.

Mr McElduff mentioned the secondary school, and I have greatly supported that in the past. The school has a current enrolment of 509 pupils, its highest ever. The ETI has stated that it requires an extension or a new build. I think that the Department and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) are neglecting the Carrickmore community. If the new build or extension does

not happen soon, people in the area will become very disillusioned.

Spatial planning and housing is a fundamental issue for the local development plans. The Minister has outlined in his strategic planning policy statement (SPPS), which was published in September, the role of the new two-tier planning system. The local council has a fundamental and exciting role to play in trying to bring forward a local development plan that is cognisant of community planning criteria. Obviously, housing will be crucial in that and, as Mr McElduff said, many farm families have wanted to build houses in the rural area. Over the past 20 years, there has been a very successful approval rate for houses in the countryside there, but I know that he is concerned about PPS 21 in relation to the compelling and personal circumstances. Perhaps that is something that the Department will revisit to make sure that the local authority will be able, through its planning division, to approve the type of one-off housing that is required.

I have requested from the Housing Executive details on the current situation in the town of Carrickmore. As of March 2014, 19 applications had been made for the Carrickmore area, which comprises Carrickmore, Loughmacrory and Mountfield; six of those were deemed to be in housing stress, but only two allocations were made. The only places outside Omagh where allocations were lower than housing stress applications were Carrickmore, Gortin and Drumquin.

There has been a strong desire for people to own their own house in the Carrickmore area. That is where the zoning of land is crucial. We have a "land lock" situation that will have to be addressed by the local authority when it draws up its local development plan. We could go into the history of it, but that would not be worthwhile here. It is fair to say, however, that young married couples deserve the opportunity to have a social house, a co-ownership house or the wherewithal to build their own home. It is an area where there has always been a strong self-help approach to building houses by families supporting one another with the building if they had a site.

I support the sentiments of what Mr McElduff is at, and I hope that the Department and the council, with its new role and functions, will deliver to make sure that this community continues to grow. I appeal to the Department of Education to recognise the circumstances and to support Mr Warnock, Mr McCann, and

other teachers in that school who want to have a new build.

Mr Hussey: When I first read what the Adjournment debate was about, I presumed that Mr McElduff was going to go to space, but then I read a little bit more, and I read that it was the Carrickmore area, so my plans of sending you to the moon have failed. In all seriousness, there is no doubt that this is an important issue in Tyrone generally, because we have quite a few small towns that face a similar issue. I am sure that there may be residents in Carrickmore who would be surprised to find a unionist in the Chamber this evening supporting your call, because clearly — it is an accepted fact — Carrickmore is not a unionist area. However, that is not what we are looking at. We are not looking at internal politics; we are looking at the need for housing.

As the Member knows, I have attended the Patrician centre on several occasions; I have also attended events at the Dean Maguire school and have always been made very welcome. There is no doubt that anyone who travels through the town will always see activity; it is a very busy town. There is no doubt that, in County Tyrone, most people want to live near their home place. I am an Omagh man, and I have always wanted to live in or near Omagh.

Mr McElduff is a Carrickmore man, and over the years that I have known him, both as a member of Omagh District Council and of this Chamber, he has been very proud of his association with that town, and rightly so. It should be permissible for people to live in the area that they were brought up in.

Reference has been made to the Omagh area plan, the west Tyrone area plan, the local development plan, and plans about plans about plans. Reference has been made to PPS 21. As you know, my colleague Councillor Bert Wilson was the champion of PPS 21 when he was chairman of the council. He fought very hard to try to get many of these rural issues resolved, because we have many issues in the former Omagh District Council area whereby people want to live in the country and have not been able to do so.

I fear that today, the Minister will attempt to pass this back to councils. He looks quite startled, but he looks like that all the time. Maybe it is this space that does it, Minister.

The council has responsibility for planning issues. The council will make its decisions, but will do so on the plans that are given to it, perhaps by the Department. We need to see a

review of the planning system in Northern Ireland to take into account the fact that people want to remain in their local areas. People from Carrickmore do not want to have to go and live in Omagh. They do not want to go and live in Dungannon. They want to live in Carrickmore, as people in Fintona want to live in Fintona; people in Drumquin want to live in Drumquin, and so on. I support the call to support as many people as possible to live within the area. Let us look at the plans. Any town in Tyrone should have something similar whereby land and housing availability are looked at. I support that call this evening. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us something positive to take back on spatial development in the future, not just to Carrickmore but to the other small towns in County Tyrone.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank my party colleague for bringing this Adjournment topic before the House and affording me the opportunity to speak on it.

The Housing Executive has confirmed that there will be no new social housing built in Omagh before 2020, for the reasons outlined by my party colleague, despite hundreds of people currently being classed as homeless or in housing stress. New figures reveal that since 2010, only 62 Housing Executive properties have been built in the whole of west Tyrone. The number of new builds is the lowest of any constituency across the North and is in striking contrast to the Foyle area, where there has been over 1,300 social housing starts in the past five years.

Currently, there are over 635 names on the Housing Executive's Omagh waiting list. That extends to Carrickmore. Of those, 93 are deemed to be homeless, while a further 183 are regarded as in housing stress. In Strabane, it is an even bleaker picture. There are 695 people on the waiting list. Of those, 157 are classed as homeless and 321 are in housing stress. Although there is some let up on the horizon for Strabane, where plans are being drawn up for 45 new builds by 2019, it is indeed a much gloomier picture for Omagh, Carrickmore and the hinterlands beyond.

Recently, a Housing Executive spokesperson said that their studies suggested that the need for further social housing in Omagh was zero and that this was unlikely to change between 2015 and 2020. Consequently, there are no plans to build any new houses in the Omagh district or Carrickmore. Urgent action is needed to address the social housing crisis that exists within West Tyrone, Strabane, Omagh,

Carrickmore and the hinterlands. You will forgive me for expanding to other parts of West Tyrone: as I said, I welcome the plans to build 45 social housing units in Strabane, but that does not even put a dent on the waiting lists.

I have just this week received confirmation from Habinteg that it is to build four two-bedroom units and two one-bedroom apartments at the site of King's Corner on Bridge Street in Strabane. The house on the site has built heritage value, and that is where the apartments are going. As Members will know, it is a very iconic building, but I welcome the fact that it will be turned into apartments and restored to its former glory.

4.45 pm

The number of applicants on the social housing waiting list and those listed as statutorily homeless in West Tyrone has remained at the same consistently high level for a long number of years. The piecemeal approach taken by previous Ministers for Social Development, who made provision for only 62 social housing units in the constituency over the past five years, highlights their abject failure to target resources on the basis of social need. I appreciate that we have the Environment Minister here today to respond to the debate.

A Housing Executive spokesperson said that, during 2014-15, 117 allocations were made in Omagh and that, as of March, there were 635 applicants on the Omagh waiting list and 183 in housing stress. Single young males and females made up 56% of those deemed to be in housing stress. Despite the number queueing up for social housing, there will no new builds in the current decade for the reasons outlined by my colleague Mr McElduff.

I urge the Minister to do what he can to support zoning for development for social housing not just in Carrickmore but, as others have said, in the wider west Tyrone area. People want to live, as they say in Strabane, where they were reared, so I urge the Minister to take action immediately.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I take the opportunity to commend Barry for tabling the debate today on spatial planning to meet demand for housing in the Carrickmore area. Barry and I are from opposite ends of the same parish, so I am very familiar with Carrickmore. Indeed, I know about the great pride that people there have in the area and the demand to live locally. There is and has been for quite some time a situation

there in which demand has completely outstripped supply. I can see it in neighbouring areas such as Loughmacrory, where I am from, Pomeroy and Beragh and other villages around the district such as Killyclogher. People from Carrickmore are forced to live in those areas because they cannot get a home in the village or area where they are from. That is very disappointing. Barry is right: they are constantly checking the papers and with housing agents and whatnot to see what opportunities might arise.

The importance of living locally is about not just the emotional attachment, which, of course, is very important, but the sustainability of the community. It is important for services, schools, sporting organisations — we know how important those are in the Carrickmore area — shops and other services. Reference was made earlier to the primary and secondary schools in the area. I am certainly very familiar with Dean Maguirc, being a former pupil and having taught there for a number of years. Indeed, the next generation — my son — started there in September. We feel very passionately and strongly about Dean Maguirc, and it is a project that we will continue to push very strongly.

Reference was made to the Omagh area plan, which, I think it is fair to say, is painfully outdated. It was crafted in 1987 and is the planning framework that we are operating on. It sets out the broad uses of land in the district, but it definitely is painfully out of date. The Omagh area plan references a number of key issues: housing, industry, recreation and open space. There has been development from an industrial and economic point of view, as well as good development for recreation and open space. A lot of that has been made possible by the voluntary efforts of individuals with a bit of enterprise and dedication. There has, however, definitely been a shortage on the housing front, so I certainly support the topic being debated.

It is great to see the Minister here today. The debate is timely because Fermanagh and Omagh District Council is working up its local development plan as we speak. It is important that it works diligently to ensure that there is an effective spatial strategy for Carrickmore and all the towns, villages and settlements throughout the district.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Chomhalta as an ábhar áirithe seo a thabhairt os comhair an Tionóil fá choinne díospóireachta inniu. First, I thank the Member for his interest in this issue,

which I consider an important topic for debate. Good housing is a fundamental human need that plays a significant role in shaping our lives and our communities. It is an issue of concern for everyone.

Mr McElduff and Mr Byrne have already given us a virtual tour of Carrickmore, which lies around 10 miles to the east of Omagh on a plateau bounded to the north and west by the Sperrins uplands. With Slieve Gallion to the east, the locality is extremely impressive. The number of cairns, stone circles, standing stones and raths in the vicinity indicate the richness of the area. The town itself is steeped in history. Carrickmore also has a vibrant rural community, evidenced by the fact that almost 200 planning applications for single dwellings, including outline, full and reserved matters, have been approved within a five-mile radius of the village over the past five years.

Access to good housing contributes to creating a safe, healthy and prosperous society. I firmly believe that this is fundamental to creating places where communities such as Carrickmore can flourish. Housing is a key driver of physical, economic and social change, and it is crucial that we manage housing growth in a sustainable way. That means placing particular emphasis on the importance of the interrelationship between the location of local housing, jobs, facilities and services and infrastructure.

I recognise that housing functions cut across the responsibilities of a number of Departments. That being the case, I work closely with my Executive colleagues on housing matters, particularly with DRD and DSD and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. My Department also engages with a range of non-governmental bodies involved in the delivery of housing, such as industry groups, developers and housing associations.

Members will be aware that I have fundamentally overhauled the planning system and redefined the landscape of local government in the North. On 1 April 2015, the majority of planning powers transferred from my Department to the 11 new councils, giving them a much broader range of powers and flexibilities to implement change on the ground where it matters most. The new strategic planning policy statement (SPPS), which I published last month, sets out my expectations for the delivery of planning functions across the region. This includes how the planning system can play a positive and supporting role in the delivery of homes to meet the full range of housing needs

within the wider framework of sustainable development.

Within that wider framework of furthering sustainable development, councils now have the important responsibility of setting a vision for the long-term future development of their area through the preparation of local development plans. Mr McElduff and other Members referred to the age of the Omagh area plan: it is fair to say that that is one OAP that is certainly past its "Best before" date. Councils now have the positive task of facilitating housing growth in response to changing housing need, which is central to meeting the needs and aspirations of society.

That includes the delivery of social and affordable homes and supporting urban and rural regeneration, particularly in deprived areas.

My approach to housing is to ensure an adequate and available supply of quality housing to meet the range of housing needs; promote more sustainable housing development in existing urban areas; provide mixed housing development, with homes in a range of sizes and tenures; and integrate housing in mixed-use developments.

In preparing their LDPs, I expect councils to bring forward a strategy for housing together with appropriate policies and proposals tailored to the specific circumstances of the plan area that must also reflect the strategic policy approach of the SPPS. Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, using its newly devolved planning powers, is preparing a new local development plan for its area. That new plan will build on preparatory work carried out previously for the west Tyrone area plan 2019. The LDP process is the main vehicle for assessing future housing land requirements and managing housing growth to achieve sustainable patterns of residential development. The SPPS provides strategic guidance for plan preparation to assist councils with that process.

The DRD's regional development strategy (RDS) 2035 provides long-term policy direction to guide the public, private and community sectors and gives regional guidance on managing housing growth to achieve sustainable patterns of residential development. It provides a broad housing evaluation framework to assist councils in making decisions on the allocation of housing growth in their area through the LDP process. The strategy also sets out housing growth indicators as a guide to councils in preparing LDPs. Those figures are an estimate of the housing

needed in each council area. They provide a guide to councils for allocating housing distribution across their area and cover urban and, importantly, rural housing growth. An important step in the housing allocation process is that councils make the correct judgements to achieve a complementary urban and rural balance that meets the need for housing in their towns and in the smaller settlements and rural parts of their area. I am sure that Members from areas with a larger rural population, particularly in the west of the region, will appreciate that.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has an important role to play in identifying housing need and the potential for housing growth by carrying out housing needs assessment and housing market analysis. Those identify the range of housing needs, including that for social and affordable housing, as well as providing a solid evidence base that councils can use in making decisions to zone land to meet need. Councils should also use the RDS figures as baselines or starting points when developing housing strategies and policies in their LDP. If necessary, they can then be adjusted in light of the Housing Executive's housing needs assessment or housing market analysis.

A further positive outcome of the local government reforms that I have introduced is community planning powers for councils. That has integrated existing council responsibilities, such as land use planning, with local economic development, off-street parking and local tourism. Community planning enables councils to work in partnership with central government, statutory bodies and others, including businesses, voluntary organisations and communities, to develop and implement a shared vision for their area. It involves integrating service and function delivery and producing a community plan that will set out the future direction of a council area and help tackle cross-cutting issues that require a collaborative approach, such as housing provision. Furthermore and subject to the successful passage of the Regeneration Bill through the Assembly, urban regeneration and community development powers and budgets are due to transfer from the DSD to councils next year. That will enhance and further integrate the levers that councils have to meet housing requirements in their area.

The wide-ranging reforms to the planning system and to local government provide a real opportunity to redefine the role of local government in delivering housing for local people. New development plan responsibilities, coupled with community planning powers, have

enhanced the ability of councils to implement spatial planning frameworks to shape local places and meet local needs and priorities such as housing provision in communities such as Carrickmore. Finally, I recognise that much of today's debate has focused on the provision of housing in the rural parts of Carrickmore. I also acknowledge that, during the formulation of the SPPS, significant issues were raised in relation to rural planning issues. I remind Members today that I have already instructed my officials, as a priority, to carry out a full review of strategic policy on development in the countryside. That has already commenced.

Adjourned at 5.00 pm.

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