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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 March 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Barney Eastwood

Mr Speaker: Mr Patsy McGlone has been given leave to make a statement on the death of Barney Eastwood that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called to speak, they should rise in their place and continue to do so. All Members called will have up to three minutes in which to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until the business has concluded.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, as a lígean do an rud seo a thógáil inniu. Thanks very much, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to raise the matter of the sad departure of Barney Eastwood. Born in Cookstown in 1932, Barney was known principally for boxing, as you will know, Mr Speaker, but Gaelic football was also his passion. He was an All-Ireland winner with Tyrone minors in 1948, when he scored four points in the Croke Park final.

As we know, he was a very successful businessman. At one time, he employed 400 people in Northern Ireland. However, his biggest achievement, and what he is best remembered for, was reviving boxing in Belfast during the worst years of the Troubles. When the city closed down early at night and very few people even ventured out, he managed to ignite an interest in people right across the communities in Belfast. Of course, that culminated with the success of Barry McGuigan becoming world champion in June 1985. That success was a symbol of hope through the darkness and bad days of the Troubles. It did not end there: he managed four other world champions, all from a small gym on Castle Street.

Not so well known were his generous, charitable deeds that were carried out, as would be expected, with discretion. He is survived by his wife, Frances; his sons Brian, Peter, Adrian,

Stephen and Fearghal; his daughter, Fiona; 23 grandchildren; and 15 great-grandchildren. I extend our sincere sympathy to them all. He is a cousin of my mother's, so my entire family will be sympathising with the Eastwood family at this time.

Barney contributed hugely to sport, to business and to society in Northern Ireland. At the right hand of God may he be. Ar dheis Dé go raibh sé.

Ms Ennis: It is indeed a very sad time for Irish boxing and for boxing fans across the world to hear the sad news of Barney Eastwood's passing. He was a unique character, and his passion for sport and business was unquestionable. He loved sport. He was a sportsman in the true sense of the word, but he was also a very proud Tyrone man. On behalf of the Sinn Féin team in the Assembly, I extend our sincere condolences to Barney's wife, Frances, and to his entire extended family at this very sad time.

Mr Muir: My thoughts and prayers at this time go to the wider Eastwood family, whom I know a number of, including one of my political colleagues, Sorcha Eastwood. Barney was one of my constituents when I served as a councillor in Ards and North Down. The one thing that I will always remember for the rest of my days is that he came along to my late grandfather's funeral. My great-grandfather and my grandfather really liked a flutter, and to see Barney there really lifted us up in those very difficult times. At this time, we have to think of the entire family in very difficult circumstances. He has left a powerful legacy. He was a great man, and we in the House should remember that.

Mr Weir: I join colleagues from across the Chamber in noting and mourning the passing of Barney Eastwood. For a long time in a previous existence, like Andrew Muir, Barney Eastwood was a constituent of mine, just outside the Hollywood area. For all of us, particularly sports fans who grew up in the 1980s, Barry

McGuigan and Barney Eastwood were synonymous with one another. During particularly dark days for this country, some of our sporting heroes gave us a ray of hope. Barney Eastwood was instrumental in that in the boxing stable. We can probably pay no better tribute than what Barry McGuigan quite often said at the end of his fights, "Thank you, Mr Eastwood".

Mr McNulty: Barney Eastwood became a world-renowned figure in boxing, but his sporting roots were in the GAA. He never forgot his roots. Just a few years back, he bought Owen Mulligan's boots — the famous boots that scored the goal against Dublin in 2005 — for £32,000 and supported the development of the Father Rocks club facilities. Like, I guess, a lot of Members in the Chamber, my fondest memory is of Barry McGuigan's huge success against Eusebio Pedroza at Loftus Road and the infamous song, 'Thank You Very Much, Mr Eastwood'. My sympathies to Barney's family, friends and community. I measc na naomh go raibh sé.

Mr Nesbitt: First, Mr Speaker, I am sorry that I am late to the Chamber.

I think that I have lived a rather charmed life. I have certainly been a very lucky person professionally, not least in my first career as a sports reporter. I landed at the BBC in 1979, and, over the next few years, we had a really golden period: the international rugby team won a couple of Triple Crowns; the football team made back-to-back World Cups; Dennis Taylor won perhaps the greatest World Snooker Championship final of all time; and then there was Barry McGuigan winning the featherweight title at Loftus Road in London in 1985.

I lived in Bangor at the time, and Barry used to stay in a boarding house just round the corner. One night ahead of the fight, I remember Barry and Barney sitting in my front room — Barry with a cup of tea, Barney with a Black Bush whiskey — and just listening to the wisdom of the man was incredible. His gym was the most prestigious in the United Kingdom, and it was possibly in the top three in the world. That did wonders for Northern Ireland's reputation at a time when, frankly, we were known for all things bad.

Of course, he was not just a boxing promoter; he was a successful sportsman at all-Ireland level with Tyrone GAA, and he built a business empire from scratch, which he sold for over £100 million. So, he was quite some fella, Barney Eastwood. I have very fond memories of him.

I remember a story that he used to tell, which I never tired of hearing. When he started promoting boxing in Belfast in the 1960s, he booked the Ulster Hall and appointed a particular member of staff to look after ticket sales. On the night, Barney arrived, looked around the Ulster Hall and was very pleased to see very few empty seats. The next day, he called that guy in and said, "How did we do?" The guy said, "Oh, we did great, Barney; we only lost £300." Barney said, "We lost money?"; and the reply was, "Yeah, boss. We lost £300." So, a couple of months later, he again booked the Ulster Hall and called in the same member of staff and said, "Look, I want you to look after ticket sales, and, because you did such a great job last time, I'm putting you on profit share." Barney turned up on the night, and there was the same crowd as the last time. The next day, he called the boy in and said, "How did we do?" The reply was, "Great, Barney. We made £500".

It was always a pleasure to work with Barney Eastwood, particularly in those good days with Barry. I remember a news conference when Barry was praising Barney to the sky. He said, "That man has taught me everything I know". Barney smiled a knowing smile and said, "Yeah, but I haven't taught him everything I know". What he knew instinctively was how to be a gentleman, be a great human being and be compassionate and empathetic. He goes down in history as one of our finest, and may he rest in peace.

Mr Catney: I want to go back to when I first moved to Belfast in early 1974. I first got to know Barney Eastwood then, along with Alfie McClean, who also ran bookies' shops. Those were very dark times in Belfast, but I looked forward to their help and visits. They came into the bar, and no doubt they were talking business. Back then, the boxing was not as big a factor, but the boxing then started up, and that gave us great hope. Those of us who are of a certain vintage know where Belfast was at those times, and it meant a lot to be able to go to the Ulster Hall for some of those memorable nights and watch the boxers progress onto the world stage as they developed. I also think of his gym in Castle Street in Belfast.

I bought a small piece of an old factory called Ferguson's pie factory; I do not know if anyone here remembers it. I did up an extension to a lounge. Remember, all of that was happening behind our ring of steel. Anything that progressed Belfast and made change, Barney was there. I asked Barney to open that small lounge in The Kitchen Bar, and he turned up at the opening with all of his top boxers.

Just three weeks ago, at the funeral of my mother, the Eastwood family was represented at the church out in Lisburn. I extend my sympathies and those of all of the House to the family and the children. Barney lost a boy — a young man — and I do not want to bring that up to be sad. It caused him and the family great distress. I want to share my empathy and understanding of that grief and pass that on to all of the Eastwood family and all of his friends. I share in their grief.

Mr Speaker: If other Members wish to speak, they should rise in their place.

10.45 am

Mr McAleer: On learning of the passing of Barney Eastwood last night, the Tyrone GAA posted, "Anocht is uaigneach Tír Eoghain", "Tyrone is lonely tonight". The remark was on the passing of a GAA legend who won an All-Ireland medal in 1948 with Tyrone against Dublin and who was a stalwart of the GAA in Tyrone and, indeed, throughout Ulster during some lean and difficult years. As I said, he won an All-Ireland medal against Dublin for the Tyrone Minors in 1948, and, according to his family, it was one of the most treasured possessions that he had. No doubt, he would have been very proud of how the team has progressed in recent decades, winning the All-Ireland Senior Football Championships in 2003, 2005 and 2008. He would also have been proud at the weekend, when the county won: the under-16s, under-17s and under-20s, who were successful against Donegal and are now going through to the All-Ireland semi-final on St Patrick's Day at Croke Park against Dublin, just like he did in 1948.

I will conclude by expressing my condolences to his family, and I will just give a wee final quote. In an 'Irish News' interview in 2000, he said:

"I'm a Tyrone man, I was born a Tyrone man and I'll always be a Tyrone man. I love Tyrone people and I always loved the football."

May he rest in peace.

Mr Speaker: As there are no other Members wishing to speak, I will just add a couple of remarks. I would not profess to have been an intimate friend of Barney Eastwood, but, like many in our community, I knew him. Many people knew Barney, and Barney knew many people. I thank Patsy McGlone for tabling the matter this morning for our discussion. I follow

other Members and express my personal condolences to Barney's wide family circle and his many, many friends.

Justin McNulty made it clear that Barney's roots were, of course, in the GAA, but he was obviously a boxing stalwart. That is how I would have known him, more so in recent years. Certainly, in his heyday, he brought a renaissance to boxing in Belfast, in particular. His reach in that sport was worldwide, as we all know, and Members have given testimony to that this morning. In acknowledging the great contribution and the legacy that Barney Eastwood has left to our wider community, I also acknowledge people like Eddie Shaw, who is now deceased, John Breen and all his coaches. When Barney Eastwood was giving leadership locally, worldwide and in our community, he also had an array of talent around him who brought on and nurtured the boxers, brought them to world titles and world-class standards.

On that note, I want to share with all the Members who have expressed their condolences and expressed their tributes to Barney Eastwood's family. The last time I spoke to him was at a family funeral two or three years ago. Again, my condolences to Barney's wife, Frances, and their wider family circle.

Executive Committee Business

Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Minister to open the debate on the motion.

Ms Hargey: The rule that we are discussing today is somewhat technical. The Taxation of Pensions Act 2014 gave savers greater flexibility in how they access their money purchase pension pots known as "pension flexibilities". The Pension Schemes Act 2015 includes provision to support the pension flexibilities and creates a new term — "flexible benefit" — that covers the types of benefits to which the pension flexibility applies. It introduces the concept of "appropriate independent advice" and stipulates that that advice is given by a Financial Conduct Authority-licensed adviser.

Section 51 of the Act provides for regulations to prescribe how the new advice safeguard operates in practice. The Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) Regulations (NI) 2015 set out what trustees and managers must do to check that members with safeguarded benefits — benefits that are not money purchase or cash balance — have taken appropriate independent advice before transferring or converting safeguarded rights to provide benefits that can be accessed flexibly. They also provide for when an employer must pay for that advice.

The regulations to be approved today form part of a package of regulations that amend the 2015 regulations. They provide for a simpler process for trustees or managers to value members' pension savings classified as "safeguarded benefits" when determining

whether the requirement to take financial advice applies. That reduces burdens on schemes and confusion for some members.

As I said at the outset, this is somewhat technical, but I hope that Members appreciate why the regulations are necessary.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): As the Minister stated, the regulations have the aim of simplifying the process of valuing members' pension savings classified as "safeguarded benefits" when determining whether the requirement to take financial advice applies. The regulations also aim to address potential information failures such as lack of full information, which is essential, given the complexity of pension arrangements. That will make it easier for people to make informed decisions about benefits with guaranteed annuity rates (GARs). People with safeguarded benefits of over £30,000 are required to get Financial Conduct Authority-regulated advice. On the other hand, people with guaranteed annuity rates of less than £30,000 are exempt from seeking FCA-regulated advice, as it would be disproportionate for those with small pension pots to have to seek and pay for such advice. However, intervention is still required to ensure that those people understand the value of their GAR and can make an informed decision. It is also important that the providers issue personalised risk warnings to all members with GARs.

Issue relating to pensions are often complex, and I have tried to distil the information received by the Committee into the broad policy objectives that the regulations will implement. The Committee is content to recommend that the Assembly approve the regulations.

Ms Hargey: I thank the Chair, the Committee and Members in the Chamber today. These are the latest in a series of regulations to replace the originals, which were made in 2018, before they cease to have effect. At that time, it was not possible for the rules to be approved in the absence of the Assembly. In normal circumstances, the Department would have sought to remake regulations subject to confirmatory procedure on a rolling basis. The regulations simplify the process for trustees and managers to value members' safeguarded benefits. Pension schemes are able to use the same valuation method to determine when advice is required as for calculating the cash equivalent of the benefits for transfer purposes. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pension Schemes Act 2015 (Transitional Provisions and Appropriate Independent Advice) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Independent Review of Education

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Lyttle to move the motion.

Mr Lyttle: I move the motion and seek confirmation of cross-party support for a long-standing Alliance Party proposal that the Executive and the Assembly urgently —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member just stop?

Mr Lyttle: Sorry. Excuse me.

Mr Speaker: I thought that you had been round here long enough to know that. Thank you, Mr Lyttle.

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Education to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and an inclusive single education system.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes have been added to the total time. You will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. Please open the debate, Mr Lyttle.

Mr Lyttle: I seek confirmation of cross-party support for a long-standing Alliance Party proposal that the Executive and the Assembly implement a Bengoa-style, independent, root-and-branch review of our education system to bring forward recommendations for action that will deliver a more integrated education system that is organised and resourced to provide a quality educational opportunity for all children and young people to enable them to develop their unique personality, talent, ability and potential.

Education is the engine room for individual, social and economic development and well-being, yet our education system is in deep financial crisis. It is broke and broken. That should shock no one in the Assembly. The

former Education Authority chief executive warned over two years ago that the education system in Northern Ireland would be unaffordable, socially immobile and unfit for the 21st century without radical investment and reform. The mission of the Education Authority in Northern Ireland is to provide a high-quality education for every child, yet we now know that, at least in special education provision, it is failing in that mission. It must be a priority of the Executive and Assembly to take decisive action and implement an independent review. Whilst there have been a number of reviews of aspects of education in Northern Ireland, the Alliance Party believes that an urgent independent review of previous recommendations and our entire education system is needed to inform specific actions for radical investment and reform. We have given a commitment to take the politics and vested interests out of health: it is time to do the same for education.

We have given our commitment, of course, to support the many skilled and innovative teaching and non-teaching staff in Northern Ireland, who are passionate about their vocation and dedicated to children and young people. They deserve urgent delivery of the commitment to implement the fair pay and improved conditions agreed with the Department of Education in 2019. The implementation of that agreement needs no review. It needs to be financed and delivered. As part of that delivery, I welcome the commitment given by the Education Minister at the recent Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) conference to deliver radical change to the school inspection and improvement process, but the Assembly Education Committee made recommendations for school inspection and improvement reform in 2014.

The education system achieves positive outcomes for children and young people, particularly at primary level, according to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), but more average system-wide performance is found at post-primary level, according to international trends in maths and science study. Evidence-based research, like investigating links in attainment and deprivation, has found our education system to be high on quality and low on equity, with significant gaps in attainment that it links to a wide range of factors, including the current flawed and exclusionary approach to post-primary transfer.

The segregation and separation of our children and young people on the basis of community background at age 5 and performance in a non-

resit, unregulated and unnecessary high-stakes test at the age of 10 or 11 are two great scandals of education in Northern Ireland. The human cost is significant, and the financial cost of that division and duplication in education has been estimated by the Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre to be up to almost £100 million per year, contributing to a financial crisis that has reached tipping point for our schools, around half of which are in budget deficit and many of which are over capacity, under-resourced and in an unfit state.

An internal audit has confirmed long-standing, widely held serious concern that the special educational needs framework also fails to support children with special educational needs and teachers. It has uncovered undue and unnecessary delay to Education Authority assessment and support, which are central to delivering early intervention, and raises serious questions about the governance and accountability of our education system for the Minister of Education, the Department of Education and the Education Authority board. Those findings follow attempts by the Education Authority to cut special education nursery hours to part-time and poorly handled proposals for Belfast's special schools that were opposed by thousands of parents across our community. Non-verbal children have been left unattended for hours on special educational needs transport provision, and inadequate access to educational psychology and classroom assistant support is becoming the norm. As Chairperson of the Education Committee, I will work with colleagues to deliver accountability and support for children with special educational needs.

Area planning has been sectoral rather than innovative. The good relations indicators suggest that up to 20% of first-choice applications to integrated schools cannot be facilitated due to a lack of available places.

I therefore welcome my colleague Kellie Armstrong's proposals for an integrated education Bill and look forward to working with her to progress the legislation.

11.00 am

There are other first actions that the Executive could take to promote a more integrated and fit-for-purpose education system, such as repealing the exemption of teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, widening access to the certificate in religious education and giving more measured and substantive consideration

to the recommendations of the initial teacher training review.

About 90% of pupils in Northern Ireland are educated in schools that identify with a single tradition or denomination. We have two planning authorities; nine sectoral support organisations, funded publicly; approximately 1,153 primary and post-primary schools; and about 36% of primary schools with fewer than 105 pupils. We pay over £100 million a year to transport pupils many times past local schools to schools in a different sector. The Department of Education has a budget of about £2 billion a year, which is second only to the Department of Health, yet papers recently submitted to the Education Committee by Department of Education officials suggest resource and capital pressures of almost £1 billion a year for our education system in the financial year 2022-23.

Years of underfunding and a lack of radical investment and reform have contributed to the scale of the financial challenge. The independent root-and-branch review of our education system must therefore be urgently implemented and report in a timely manner. Its building blocks should be giving children the best start in life, as well as bringing about student attainment, inclusion, increased investment in teaching and classrooms, and reconciliation.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I will give way briefly.

Mr Allister: I have listened carefully to the Member, and I do not want to want to misrepresent his vision. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document talks about the "diversity of school types" being "not sustainable", so is it his vision that we simply have a controlled integrated sector, no maintained sector and no Irish-medium sector and that there be one state system that will be integrated in the sense that it will be for everyone?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am sure that a man of his learned opinion will realise that that would be to pre-empt a root-and-branch independent review, the like of which we are calling for.

The review should refer to radical reform for law, policy and practice; governance and administration; employment and recruitment; integrated, effective and efficient delivery; area planning; and co-design and co-production with the community.

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

It is shocking that political parties abdicated executive authority to respond to those matters for over three years, but we must now grasp the opportunity to work together to deliver better. The people of Northern Ireland demand better. They demand better than the broke and broken education system that we have inherited. They demand better on early education and childcare; parental involvement in education; post-primary transfer; curriculum access; parity of esteem for vocational pathways; collaboration with further education; quality careers advice and work experience; and effective parental, community and business partnerships to raise aspiration and attainment. The focus must be on delivering an integrated education system, organised and resourced to provide quality educational opportunity for all children. The educational, social and financial need for a different approach and a child-centred education system fit for the 21st century is clear. I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Ms Mullan: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "calls on" and insert:

"the Executive to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and a further five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Mullan: The 'New Decade, New Approach' document provided the basis for the restoration of these institutions. Sinn Féin, along with others, placed an emphasis on education throughout the negotiation process, and that, thankfully, was reflected in the final agreement. Amendment No 1 is about bringing the motion back into line with the commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach deal. That commitment, as outlined in the amendment, had a level of buy-in from all parties, so we should work to progress it. Agreements have been made before and often only partially implemented. I hope that this agreement really does signify a new approach to how we do politics and governance in this part of Ireland.

As part of my work, like many others in the Chamber, I visit schools right across the North every week. Ever-shrinking school budgets, teacher pay stagnation, crumbling school infrastructure and the rising diagnosis of special education needs have put our front-line services under massive pressure. It is my firm view that the way in which we deliver on our obligations to our children and young people, to our families and to our teachers requires fundamental reform. We must seek to ensure greater efficiency in the system where resources are used to maximise the educational benefits for children and young people.

Without predetermining the outcome of any review, there are obvious and practical changes that could be made. We must look to a more cost-effective approach to procurement and trust schools to make decisions that best suit them when it comes to accessing minor works and supplies. There must be greater progress and political leadership in area planning and the realisation of a truly sustainable network of schools with a high-quality education provision and greater educational outcomes.

The education system as we know it is at crisis point. There is no avoiding the need for reform. To shy away from tough decisions now will have devastating consequences for the system, for our children and young people and for our society in years to come.

While reform is crucial, we cannot escape the fact that the system requires a significant and urgent injection of cash. In real terms, there is well over £200 million less in the system now than there was 10 years ago.

The austerity programme pursued by the Tory Government has cruelly left its mark on our public services here, particularly on our education system. In spite of that, teachers and school leaders have delivered a high quality of education to our children and young people, many of whom have achieved great outcomes. However, that should not mask the serious tail of underachievement still experienced by many children, particularly children from working-class and disadvantaged backgrounds. Addressing that issue is also a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I hope to see the Executive advance that area of work alongside any independent review.

Our education system boasts a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values. Parents choose the schools to which they want to send their children for a multitude of reasons. Acknowledging that diversity must be part of the conversation as we

explore the prospects of what a single education system might look like. Open and frank conversations about curriculum and ethos will be crucial over the next number of years if we are to realise a truly open and inclusive education system.

I look forward to seeing the Executive take the review forward as a priority, and I encourage the widest possible engagement and participation in the process by all stakeholders involved in the provision of education here.

Sinn Féin also supports amendment No 2 in the spirit in which it is intended, but I must point out that in no way does that include the current teachers' industrial action, which should and will be sorted in the coming weeks.

Mr Carroll: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all between "greater" and "raising" and insert:

"expansion of public funding to support the delivery costs identified within the review, addressing pay disputes with teaching unions,"

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Assembly should note that amendment No 1 and amendment No 2 are mutually exclusive, so, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose amendment No 2 and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Carroll: I welcome the debate and thank the Members for tabling it. I also thank the Member who spoke previously for her support of amendment No 2.

The future of our education system seems to be on everyone's lips at the minute, and for good reason. It is clear that changes could be made to ensure that we are providing the best education service possible, not only for our young people and their educational needs but to ensure that our teachers can enjoy a decent quality of life, being paid properly for the invaluable work that they do and not being relied on to fill gaps caused by budget cuts or dealing with unmanageable workloads.

Clearly, the sector is under massive pressure, whether because of larger class sizes, fewer classroom assistants, children unable to get statemented or teachers telling us that they simply cannot take on any more. The impact is

felt by students and staff alike. There can be no doubt that cuts and budget restrictions have played a fundamental role in those issues.

I hope that we can all agree that it is unacceptable that children are going without the special assistance that they require. It is unacceptable that dedicated teachers have been forced to take industrial action for the pay rises that their colleagues across the water have received. It is also unacceptable — although I expect that not everybody in the House will agree — that young people are being educated separately, based on their religion. Integrated education represents one of the best ways that we can move beyond the communalism that we should leave in the past. It is unacceptable that schools and teachers are relying on donations for everything from basic stationery to toilet paper. It is also unacceptable that we have situations in which special needs schools have to self-fundraise to cover the cost of essential equipment for pupil support.

The situation in which our education system has been chronically underfunded and does not meet the required needs has existed for far too long. For example, while pupil numbers have risen across the board by some 2.5% since 2011, spending per head has decreased. In addition, budgets have been slashed year-on-year. Unless that is tackled, we will jump from one crisis to the next, not least with the outstanding issues of pay for teachers and other education workers. In that sense, while I welcome the motion, I have provided an amendment that I hope the proposers of the motion will accept.

At a government level, it is very clear that if we are to have any hope of creating efficiency in the sector, we have to see an injection of funding into our education system. I am not the only one saying such a thing. For example, I note that the NI Affairs Committee at Westminster pressed for an injection of funding to tackle the underspend in our education system, and I agree with that. I hope that other parties will agree to make that a key priority going forward. That is why I have tabled an amendment. Too often, the strategy for dealing with educational underfunding by the Assembly has very much been inside the austerity, neo-liberal framework of economics. Too often, discussions about solving the problem in our education system push for a reduction in schools or services. Indeed, as has been mentioned, one recent consultation on our special needs schools proposed that the majority of them should be closed through a process of amalgamation. That was a shocking proposal that was met by mass opposition from

parents, pupils, activists and trade unionists. I was proud to play a leading role in that campaign and to show how it shone a light on how the language of efficiency can often be used to push through cuts and closures to schools.

The term "efficiency costs" immediately rings alarm bells with me. While no one would disagree with the idea of more-efficient spending, we want to make sure that it is not code for cuts. I want to ensure that, if the Assembly agrees the motion today about running our schools efficiently, inclusively and with higher standards, it is because we are investing in the sector properly and where it is needed, rather than making harmful and dangerous cuts. To that end, I have tabled an amendment that argues for an expansion of public funding to support the delivery costs identified by the review and to address pay disputes in teaching unions and other education sectors.

Mr Humphrey: At the outset, I declare an interest as a governor in two schools. Without question, Northern Ireland has a world-class education system that we should be proud of, but one that we should, nevertheless, seek to reform, improve and develop as we build on that success. An independent review must be the way forward, but resources are key in managing expectations.

A widespread consultation is needed, but it is important that, in that consultation, the views of young people must be taken into account.

11.15 am

As I have said, we have a world-class education system and one that we should be proud of. Any review will start from a good base. We must pay tribute, at this stage, to the school principals, teachers, governors and staff who work in all roles in schools across the education systems in Northern Ireland for the tremendous work that they have done, particularly over the last three years, when there has been some uncertainty around the issues of funding and resource. Those people have shown how dedicated and committed they are, and they are exemplary in their motivation. They are well trained to deliver for our young people.

I would also very much welcome any expert panel that the Minister might set up around a number of issues, including underachievement in education. However, a panel must not simply look at education in terms of those who

populate it. It is important that we have community role models who the young people might look up to, such as people who have been a success in industry, commerce and the professions. Again, young people, or their representatives, must be part of that panel. That is hugely important.

Future investment in our young people is also hugely important. A joined-upness across government is absolutely needed to deal with inefficiency and duplication in funding, if that exists. Any review must take into consideration work across the Departments here at Stormont, and also with universities in terms of the estate, sports facilities and provision, local government and, of course, neighbourhood partnerships.

I commend and pay tribute to Derek Baker, the permanent secretary in the Department of Education, for the role he has played over the last couple of years, along with Tommy O'Reilly, who, as deputy permanent secretary, did a tremendous job of work with Members ensuring that there was stability, and even initiative, during the time when no Ministers were in place.

As I have said, it is important to get economies of scale and reduce wastage. We must ensure that all funding goes to front-line services and, as a governor of a secondary school, I can assure you that too often money is used to provide professional counselling, for example, which is taken out of the front-line budget of a school principal and reduces the money that can be spent on education. That is simply not acceptable. Greater working across government may well improve and develop that work. We can no longer have a silo approach to those issues.

The agreement of the House around those issues is important but, nonetheless, implementation is the key. We cannot create false hope and unrealistic expectations. We need to address key issues in underfunding and resource of special educational needs. Only a number of weeks ago, some of us in the Education Committee met the leadership team of the special educational needs sector in Northern Ireland. What we heard was stark and frankly it was, in some cases, disgraceful.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I am happy to give way.

Mr McCrossan: In the context of the Member's contribution in relation to the presentation received, particularly that received from the EA

and the failings found in their internal report — an audit, as they called it, but not carried out by auditors — does the Member agree that, given what we have heard, it is time for a full independent review of the EA?

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

Mr Humphrey: Actually, I am grateful to the Member for agreeing with me, because he knows that I called for that at the Committee last week.

Narrowing the gap in educational underachievement, free school meals and access to good-quality education is important for all our young people. Having known the Minister for many years, I have no doubt in my mind that he will listen to the assertions, the presentations and the information that will come through any process, and will act in the best interests of our young people.

It is important that we seek to introduce meaningful, deliverable proposals — they must be deliverable — that will make a positive impact and change lives for many. Every child is entitled to the best start in life. We must not create expectations, but we must deliver. It is important that the House unites around education as we go forward. We can no longer simply criticise about money not being provided. The Minister set out very clearly at the Committee, a number of weeks ago, the money that he needs to ensure that education moves forward and delivers. We must deliver for all the people, including many in the constituency that I represent, who come from working-class, hard-to-reach communities — in particular, young Protestant boys, but also a number of young Catholic boys.

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

Mr Humphrey: If this continues, it is simply not an education system that is fair. We will support the Alliance motion.

Mr McCrossan: At the outset, I put firmly on record my sincere appreciation to Derek Baker and Tommy O'Reilly, and to the principals, teachers and classroom assistants who have kept the lights on in our schools over the past three years in the absence of these institutions. The work that our principals and teachers have done is fantastic. They continued, in the face of many challenges, to ensure that our children were looked after in the circumstances that we faced.

I speak as the SDLP's education spokesperson, and I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the important debate. I thank Chris Lyttle and his colleague Kellie Armstrong for tabling the motion. We can all agree that our current education system is unsustainable. It is haemorrhaging money on a significant scale, and it is unsustainable in its current form. Our public services face inescapable pressures, and education is not immune from those. If we do not take action, our schools and the many dedicated principals and teaching staff across the North will continue to suffer — and suffer they have. Members made clear some of the resource challenges that our schools have faced and how, as put on record in recent weeks, they have been largely ignored and isolated by the Education Authority.

We need more money, but we also need to look at how our education system delivers for each child in Northern Ireland. In that context, the SDLP supports an independent review of education. Mr Humphrey claimed that his party does, too. We support a review that will look at how we can best provide top-quality, top-class education for all. We need an education system that will provide the building blocks for our children and give them the best possible future.

Our education system is in need of reform that moves towards the development of a single education system and the development of the integrated sector, while still operating a system where parental choice continues to play an important role in ensuring that our schools deliver efficiently and effectively, with improved access to the curriculum and ever higher standards. The review must not be a slash-and-burn exercise that is conducted with the typical haphazard and inconsistent approach that we have become accustomed to in our public services.

Change cannot happen overnight, and there is no one-size-fits-all fix to the situation. Our priority should be the quality of the education provided and how that can be done sustainably without the need for unnecessary school closures or any decision having a hugely disproportionate impact on certain parts of society. The complete abandonment of faith-based schools or Irish-medium schools is not the way forward. We should consider the future prospect of joint-faith schools supporting the education of our children and young people of different backgrounds together.

Another issue on which we can all agree is that we need to invest more in integrated education. Despite coming a considerable way on provision — we now have 65 fully integrated

schools and another nine in the pipeline, in response to parental choice — we have not come far enough. I have seen great work undertaken in the integrated sector, as have many Members. Drumragh Integrated College, which the Minister will know well, in my West Tyrone constituency is possibly one of the best examples of how integrated education works so well. I put on record my appreciation to the retired principal, Nigel Firth, for his fantastic work in ensuring that the integrated movement has a footprint in west Tyrone.

Currently, we have no ministerial target for the percentage of integrated schools; we have no action plan from the independent review of integrated education that took place three years ago; and we have used only 14% of the available funding for integrated education from the Fresh Start Agreement. Those issues need immediate and tangible action, which we have not seen to date. Clear targets need to be set, and proper capital and resource investment in the sector is needed, with buy-in from each political party. That has to be a starting point. I do not believe that this Minister or the previous Education Minister were totally committed to increasing integration in our school system. That has to change, because the benefits of integration are clearly apparent.

We have had three years of inaction, with no Government here. That has had an impact on growing a single education system. In that context, and in coming to the Sinn Féin amendment, I believe that, given the crisis in education, we are in need of an independent review of education and of how we can better utilise our resources and public finances.

In keeping with the declarations in 'New Decade, New Approach', we must ensure that every school has a sustainable core budget to facilitate the delivery of quality education.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McCrossan: We also need to look at how educational outcomes can be improved in the system; improvements that could be, where possible, cost neutral to the public purse. We add our support to Mr Carroll's amendment as well.

Mr Butler: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and as the party's spokesperson on education, I welcome the motion and reservedly support amendment No 1. It is, I think, unanimously agreed across the Assembly that improvement, sustainability, good governance

and inclusivity for all our children should be a focus for not only the Minister of Education but all Executive Ministers. Given that education accounts for the second-largest allocation of money per annum from the Budget, that is only part of the story why we need a fundamental review of the provision, efficiency, measurability and appropriateness of education and the curriculum. All that will be underpinned by the absolute goal of seeing education and educating together as a significant factor in learning together and living together to thrive together.

Over the past few weeks, having taken my position on the Education Committee, I have been astounded by the complexity of our current system. We have two planning authorities underpinned by seven sectoral organisations, but that only fractionally indicates some of the complex, overtly administrative and analytically cumbersome systems that are in place. Recent reports and surveys have indicated that the vast majority of parents would like to see an end to segregated-style education. Ending that could take many forms. One might agree with that ideal, and some might even think that it is a modern and progressive ideal.

However, back as far as 1923, a certain Charles Vane-Tempest-Stewart, or Lord Londonderry for short, tried to introduce the Education Act 1923 but got short shrift from just about every quarter. In 2020, a lot has changed, but much has stayed the same. Predominantly, we see our children segregated from age four on, with most controlled schools in particular making some headway in moves to change that. But let us be clear about this: segregation does not end there. Due to the draconian exemption of teachers from fair employment legislation, segregation and discrimination are maintained. How can that be right?

We need to be brave and visionary, and we need to be outcomes-focused about a review and any recommendations. Parents and pupils' voices, along with those of our teachers, must be equally heard, but it will be incumbent on all of us to consider the societal shifts that have happened since 1923 and to entwine them into an education system that is not only fit for 2020 but projected to continually support, improve and champion our young people.

There are many aspects that we can major on today, but I will finish on one. Our young people are under more pressure than they or we ever were. They are burdened by increasing demands educationally, socially, financially and

aspirationally. Is it any wonder in this fast-paced world that we see a growing issue with mental ill health in our school-age population?

I believe that we must look at our curriculum by taking a Province-wide approach to well-being and resilience. We must ensure that a partnership approach is designed with schools, parents, carers, statutory agencies and the voluntary and community sector that makes sure that every child is central to that journey, valued and nurtured in what they are good at, inspired to be the best that they can be and convinced that this Government value their education highly. That will require us to get the building blocks right. Early intervention, parental support, tackling disadvantage, partnership and community response will be vital in transforming education into the jewel that it could and should be.

It would be remiss of us all here to not recognise the excellent work done by our teachers. Rising attainment standards across our schools pay testament to the hard work and value placed on our pupils by our teachers. In my constituency, it has been my delight to watch Lisnagarvey High School, my old school, improve year on year and transform its fortunes and that of its pupils. The next steps by the Minister and the Executive need not be hard if we can agree on the principle of not only the whole school, whole child mantra but add, importantly, every child.

Mr Newton: I am pleased to support the motion, which is a direct lift from the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to Mr Derek Baker, who, to a large extent, held the fort while elected representatives absented themselves from the Chamber. I also pay tribute to the dedication of the principals, teachers, admin and school support staff who operated in a vacuum for three years.

I am a bit nervous about some of the words that I have heard around the Chamber and about what might be regarded as a root-and-branch approach. We have much to be proud of in our education system and a strong foundation on which to build. That is not to say that we should not address issues — of course, we should — but we have much to be proud of. Our education system is a jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland, and it just needs to be polished continually to make it that much better.

11.00 am

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be brief. He says that our education system is the jewel in the crown of Northern Ireland. Does he not think it is worth qualifying that a little by pointing to the extremely poor educational outcomes in Northern Ireland for people from underprivileged backgrounds — indeed, his colleague from North Belfast drew attention to that in respect of Protestant boys — and the legacy of intense and constant division in our education system? It is hard to describe it as a "jewel in the crown" without mentioning those two things.

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

Mr Newton: I accept that there are problems and issues. I hope that we will make progress on addressing them in the next two years of this Assembly term.

Let me point out, however, that, when universities in Scotland are looking to attract students, Northern Ireland is one of the areas that they search. England's academic results fall far below those of Northern Ireland, so there is much to be proud of.

It was disappointing that, when the proposer was asked by Mr Allister not to quantify the motion but to define his vision, he was not able to answer in any meaningful way.

There can be no doubt that our schools face challenges. I accept that. Many aspects of our system need to be challenged. I do not like the term "underachievement", but we need to support pupils and give them a pathway to success. There is not any doubt that we need to make changes. We may even need to make cultural changes in our schools, but there are many aspects that we should remember. We must remember that we are investing in our children, our young people, our society and our economy. We do not have the natural resources of some countries. Our only natural resource for the future of our economy is our people.

We need to look forward with confidence and build on the success of schools. We need consensus on a way forward, as has already been said. Some have complained about area planning, but I hope that, when we come to make the hard decisions, there will be around the Chamber the unanimity that is reflected today.

The words "external" and "independent" in the motion are lifted straight from the agreement. When that was mooted in the Long Gallery a

couple of Fridays ago, the reaction among about 80 headmasters was, "Not another report". We are calling for another report, but, if we are to have another report, we need to involve the skills and knowledge of existing principals. We need to take notice of what they say. We cannot have an independent coming from wherever and attempting to impose. We have much experience that needs to be enhanced, taken cognisance of and attended to.

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

Mr Newton: If you were looking for what might make up the essentials of —

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

Mr Newton: We will support the motion.

Mr O'Dowd: I support the Sinn Féin amendment and the amendment in Mr Carroll's name.

I note that Mr Newton, in his closing remarks, referred to a group of principals saying, "Not another report". I have to say that that is my reaction when I see proposals for a review, a working group or whatever it may be, but there is the space and opportunity for an independent review of the education sector that will challenge us all on what we believe an education system should look like. However, in looking to the future, it is worthwhile to look to the past. Mr Butler referred to 1923, when provision was made for a single education system. That was rejected for a variety of reasons. The Catholic Church was acting in a selfish manner at that time, but — it is an important "but" — without Catholic education, Irishness would have been educated out of the system. Our young people who wanted to learn about their culture, their language, their sport, their history and their nation would not have been given that opportunity. I am no defender of the Catholic Church, but, in this instance, it has given great service to the community who wished to hold on to their Irish identity in this state.

Let us see what we will do to move forward. Change is a huge challenge for politicians. I often tell the story that, when I was appointed Education Minister in 2011, I was in post for only 15 minutes and was going through those doors for a vote when a Member from the Benches opposite, who is no longer a Member of the House, stopped me and said, "Minister,

you have to deal with this school. It has to close". I was aware of the school. The school went through the process, and it had to close, and I signed off on that. I then opened the media pack that Ministers get, and there was a photograph of the same Member standing with a placard that said, 'Save This School'. I said to him a few days later, "I thought you told me to close that school", and he said, "Minister, all politics is local". I accept that analogy, but, for us to make change in our education system, we will have to set that one aside. Health is another area in which we will have to set it aside.

Over the Assembly's last three terms, it has created change in the education system. We brought about the Education Authority, which was a huge compromise on all sides of the House. It is not the vision that I wanted, that those on the Benches opposite wanted or even that those on the Benches to my left wanted; it was a compromise. This is the question: has the vision that was proposed in the Education Authority been delivered? When you look at the SEN report and the audit of how children with special educational needs have been treated, you see that that vision has not been delivered. There is an onus on the Education Authority, its executive branch and its board to deliver that vision because this is not what the Assembly voted for or asked for. There are challenges there.

When I hear calls for a single Education Authority from certain quarters of the Chamber, it concerns me that there are certain sections of our education system that they are looking to set aside. The Irish-medium sector always comes in for a poke in these debates, even though it provides a high-quality education system under the parental preference procedure. Parents have chosen to educate their children through the Irish-medium sector, and they should be allowed to continue to do so.

I also have concerns that we could reach a stage where our Irishness is no longer taught to our young people. That cannot be allowed to be the case, any more than it can be allowed that people's Britishness is not taught to them in their schools. People's identity is important to them. It is important that they learn about it in a way that is not exclusive but inclusive and in a way that means that we do not believe that we are superior to anyone else who lives in this part of the island or anywhere else.

I am all for an inclusive education system, but we have to recognise our history, our future and where we are going. Most of all, we have to deliver a high-quality education system to those

who most need it. One Member talked about Protestant working-class boys: working-class —

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

Mr O'Dowd: — Catholics are not doing too well either. Let us ensure that education for the working class is good, regardless of religious belief.

Mr M Bradley: I support the motion. I recognise the significant financial strain that the Department of Education is under. An expected overspend for 2019-2020 of approximately £25 million to £30 million is not a good backdrop against which to commence an independent review of education under the New Decade, New Approach. A root-and-branch review is timely and necessary. It will result in some hard decisions to be taken by the Executive. The Department faces many challenges. Special educational needs have risen by some 20% in the past five years. There is a SEN backlog that will require significant resources to rectify. Salaries take up 80% to 90% of school funding allocation. An increase in the rateable value of the school estate and a great many schools now operating in deficit paints a bleak picture.

The motion is timely. Our education system needs a fundamental overhaul. However, I stress that our teaching staff, classroom assistants and pupils perform to a very high standard with inadequate resources. Many pupils attain excellent examination results. As many Members have done, I pay tribute to our head teachers, teachers and boards of governors. Any independent review will need to set realistic parameters to highlight and eradicate duplication and lack of sustainability.

If our education system is to evolve to meet the challenges that lie ahead and provide every child with the opportunity to be the best that they can be, the Executive will have to recognise that a significant additional budget allocation could be needed to enact any recommendations that may emerge from such a fundamental review, thereby leading to greater efficiency and accountability.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion as amended.

We all recognise that there is much room for improvement in our education system. I welcome the external review as outlined in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. It is only right that we allow that review to take its course, hearing from parents and professionals

alike, making its independent recommendations and bringing them to fruition.

Our education system has evolved from a system that was available only to those who were well off to a system that is now, hopefully, universal. Our system can and must do better. I have visited schools across the sector in recent weeks. Whilst there is no doubt that there is a need for fundamental reform, it is important that we listen to the views of those on the front line, both teachers and parents. Our system recognises parental choice, and it gives us a mix of options that include faith-based, integrated and Irish-medium education. Where our system has flaws is in its burdensome bureaucracy, red tape and management inefficiency. I recognise that duplication exists and that efficiencies must be made. I recognise the shortcomings in provision for those with special educational needs, in school maintenance, in school transport and much more. However, that does not mean that we should offer a one-size-fits-all view of education.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: Of course.

Ms S Bradley: Does the Member accept that educational establishments, like others, should not just respect but celebrate our difference? We should aim to have a society that can acknowledge difference, celebrate it, support it and recognise it. You said that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. I agree, but will the Member go further and say that we should aim to have a mature society that celebrates difference and is not threatened by it?

11.45 am

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that, when they give way, they should take their seat and only resume standing once they have taken the Floor again. The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McNulty: Apologies, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

The Member took the words right out of my mouth. We need to protect parental choice and to celebrate diversity.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: Of course.

Mr Storey: I appreciate the comments of the two Members who have spoken. Can he explain to the House how celebrating difference is reflected in the Catholic certificate, which excludes certain other people from applying for jobs in certain schools in Northern Ireland?

Mr McNulty: I am not aware of the specific conditions that you speak of, but I know how I was educated. I was educated as a Catholic and I know that diversity was celebrated, so I am not aware of what you are specifically referring to.

We need to protect parental choice and to celebrate diversity, but that does not mean that the management structures at the centre cannot change. It does not mean that we cannot drive more efficiencies. We need better governance. We need a joined-up system that better delivers. We need a system that allows and celebrates a school's ethos and encourages cross-community work, not just when at school but in work, sport and the wider world.

Our schools are the bedrock of our communities and I would like the review to embrace not just what is in the classroom but the world around us. I am going to go a little bit off-piste. I think education must allow and empower children to make the most of their talents. It is time to think outside the box. Our curriculum is currently geared towards manufacturing and the professions. Our focus should be on a curriculum that delivers for a new economy that this place should be building towards. The curriculum should encompass coding, environmental awareness, IT, public health, a focus on the impact of lifestyle choices, empathy and developing and building relationships, celebrating diversity, resilience, a focus on positive mental health, and virtual learning. The hidden benefits of virtual learning are enhanced by early adoption, and it promotes self-directed learning and innovative, individualistic thinking.

We recognise that perseverance and the sheer amount of time that you dedicate to your learning are more important than intelligence. We need to recognise that, given the right set of circumstances, any student can learn and excel in their education. I strongly believe that every child can learn, regardless of their innate level of intelligence, and that gaps in achievement can be mitigated through research and by understanding the differences in individual backgrounds and opportunity. I support the motion and the amendment.

Miss Woods:

"Northern Ireland has a complex educational structure with a range of bodies involved in its management and administration."

That is a very simple sentence in the opening of a House of Commons briefing paper on the school system here. It just about touches on the complexity of how we educate our children. The report of a 2019 inquiry by a House of Commons Select Committee stated:

"there is a clear need to reduce duplication across the education sector and for consolidation of the school estate ... there is growing concern across the sector that current funding levels are not sufficient to deliver the quality of education that pupils deserve and parents expect."

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), Northern Ireland has experienced the largest cut in education spend since 2009-2010 — 11% in real terms — compared with other parts of the UK. Due to the complicated structure of education in Northern Ireland, it has long been argued that money is not being spent in the most efficient way. Whilst it is important to consider the ongoing demand for the way in which education is currently delivered, it is of equal relevance to look at what would best benefit our children. The stark reality of our system and the quality of our education need to be reviewed, root and branch.

It was good news to read in the 'NDNA' document that the five parties committed to:

"establish an external, independent review of education provision".

That included the prospect of moving towards a single education system. It is good news that we are able to debate this motion here today, but we must kick-start the commitments in the 'NDNA' document and start a review of education provision as promised, and that must be done quickly. I am honoured to be standing beside one of the first 28 pupils to attend Lagan College, but she had to attend that integrated school surrounded by armed RUC guards, so we have much to do.

An ambitious, single, publicly funded and secular education system for Northern Ireland is required. Academic testing should not be used to determine admissions to post-primary schools, and the well-being of the students who have to take those tests to conform to the system, and that of their parents, must be addressed. Ideally, students should attend local, community-based schools and receive outstanding levels of education. In our

segregated society, the integration of students and children is vital to making it more peaceful, cooperative, progressive and safe. How can we expect to move on from our past and from the divide if we continue to separate our children from the age of four?

We have 65 integrated schools in Northern Ireland. According to Integrate My School, the Ulster University estimated that the additional cost of a divided education system is between £16 million and £95 million a year. That money should be spent where it is needed — for example, on improving SEN provision — not on continuing separation. However, if a financial argument alone will not change our system, perhaps a more qualitative one will. Integrated education facilitates societal change, unites people and encourages a more positive social attitude of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect. A recent study showed that two thirds of respondents would not want to send their children to a school that is based on their religion. Further research shows that a majority of parents want their school to become integrated. Therefore, we must ask: what or who is stopping them?

The education system continues to fail children and young people from lower-income backgrounds. In 2017-18, 54% of girls who were entitled to free school meals obtained five GCSEs at grades A* to C, compared with 83% of girls who were not. The figures for boys are also stark, with less than half — 44% — of those from lower-income backgrounds getting that level of post-primary qualification, compared with 75% of their peers who are better off. It is not possible for wider socio-economic inequalities to be addressed through a single education system, but early intervention makes a big difference, and that must be considered in any review.

It is not just the set-up of the system that we need to look at, though; it is what our children are being taught or, in many cases, not taught in our schools, and we need to reform the curriculum. There are many examples, but I will briefly address the shortcomings of the educational experiences of those who identify as LGBTQ. The Department of Education's research, published in 2017, raised serious concerns about the inadequacy of relationships and sexuality education (RSE) in our schools and how that puts young people at risk. The report noted that half of respondents were bullied because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 92% said that there was insufficient information available on LGBTQ issues in their post-primary school. Two thirds of those who identify as LGBTQ do not feel

welcome or valued in their post-primary school. Some decided not to come out because of the negative attitudes of others. Such attitudes, it appears, are based on a lack of understanding. That, in turn, can lead to stereotypes and, in some cases, intolerance. Some 88.6% of LGBTQ people have heard homophobic or transphobic language in school.

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

Miss Woods: Research for the 'Through our Minds' report found that 61.2% of LGBT people had been called hurtful names that related to their sexuality. Such experiences in our schools are not totally down to the inadequacy of RSE, but that is a start, and it opens up the wider issue of the equality and quantity of RSE in general.

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

Mr Catney: I support the motion and amendment. I thank our teachers, our headmasters, all the classroom assistants and even the lollipop ladies, although, because I have stopped running my grandchildren to school, I do not know whether they still exist. I thank all of them.

I put on record my thanks to Mr Baker, the permanent secretary, for the contribution that he made over the three years that the Assembly was not working. I remember that, as soon as we got it up and going, the Minister went out with me to visit a local school, where a school enhancement project was granted. I acknowledge and agree that change is needed. I remember that, until the 1980s, my parents and grandparents supported schools.

I want to put across a point on efficiencies across education. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) receives about £3 million, with which it supports 450 schools. To me, that looks and sounds like value for money. It is an inclusive education enshrined in the Catholic maintained schools sector. There is a high quality of education and standards in Catholic schools along with excellent leadership.

I really am up for the debate about change, and I know change has to happen. I recognise the positive contributions made by integrated education, and I stand here to state that a review is needed. In fact, one of the early things that I got when I came here was on the Programme for Government, and there was an

agreement right across all parties that we needed this Bengoa-type report in order to look into our education. Do not always be trying to throw out the baby with the bathwater. There are good things. Let us all look at the good. As I said at the start, I support the motion as amended.

Mr Allister: It is pretty clear to me that, although all the Executive parties said they bought into New Decade, New Approach, they have not at all bought into this issue. The first two sentences of the education section of appendix 2 state:

"The education system has a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values. However it is not sustainable."

The target of those two sentences is that you cannot go on with the current diversity in school types, yet barely at all in the debate have we heard any addressing of the problem of the sheer diversity of school types. Indeed, we have had defence, particularly from the SDLP, of maintaining the current school types.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will.

Mr Catney: I did not defend that sector at all. I stood here to inform the House of the good work that that sector does, and I stand here to state that I am up for change, that I am sure they are up for change and that I know that change is needed. Change will come about.

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

Mr Allister: It was not actually the Member I had in mind; it was the first Member from the SDLP to speak that I had in mind. *[Laughter.]* But if the cap fits, wear it, I suppose.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way for a very small point?

Mr Allister: OK.

Mr Catney: It is just to let you know that, when you attack one of us, you attack us all. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I will say the same. *[Laughter.]* We have had this running away from diversity in school types. Indeed, it is notable that the Sinn Féin amendment takes out a critical word. The

motion ends by calling for "an inclusive single education system." The Sinn Féin amendment removes the word "inclusive", because it is quite clear that Sinn Féin — indeed, it was clear from Mr O'Dowd's contribution — is not prepared to address the diversity of types because there are sacred cows, and, for Sinn Féin, of course, the greatest sacred cow is the Irish-medium sector. We have this situation where Irish medium cannot be touched and the maintained sector cannot be touched, so who will be the victim in all this? Will it be the controlled sector? Is that where the fire and the focus are? I fear it is.

New Decade, New Approach talks about equity. Well, let us talk about equity. I recently asked a series of questions of the Minister. I asked about the per pupil spend across the four sectors, and here are the figures. The controlled sector gets the least money at £3,531 per pupil. Next comes the maintained sector, which gets £3,611. Next comes the integrated controlled sector, which gets £3,669, and away out ahead is the Irish-medium sector on £3,821. The Irish-medium sector already gets 8% more than the controlled sector.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: It gets 6% more than the maintained sector. If we are going to talk about equity, let us talk about it, but let us recognise that we cannot have these sacred cows. If we are looking for efficiencies, if we are looking for equity, if we are looking for diversity and tackling it and reducing the number of sectors, surely, on any of those approaches, the most obvious candidate is the Irish-medium sector.

It is the most feted financially in the system. It is the one that is incapable of integration, because it wants to teach in a different language.

12.00 noon

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Surely the Member must realise that the Irish-medium sector has been deprived of the necessary funding from the House for many years and is now playing catch-up. It provides an invaluable contribution to communities such as mine and to towns such as Strabane and Omagh. I would like the Member to acknowledge that an Irish-medium education has a positive impact on the lives of many children.

Mr Allister: Is it playing catch-up when an Irish-medium school can now be created with 12 pupils? How is that playing catch-up? That is

favouritism in the system. I would like the Minister to assure the House that if there is any independent review, its terms of reference will address the diversity of the system; whether all sectors can be sustained; whether equity will address the overfunding of some sectors to the detriment of others; and whether we are not just interested in creating a system in which the sacred cows of the Irish-medium sector and the maintained sector are protected and the controlled sector is sacrificed, because it sounds very much to me as if that is the direction of travel.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, to respond to the debate. Minister, you have up to 15 minutes in which to speak.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. First, I thank Mr Lyttle and Ms Armstrong for tabling the motion. It is particularly good to note that much of the debate was witnessed by some young pupils who were here. I welcome their presence. I also welcome the tone of the debate and much of its content. I want to move forward on the basis that the review will have wide terms of reference; that there will be wide opportunities for the panel to look at everything; and that the review will deliver something that is fair for all pupils.

I join others in paying tribute to the work that various public servants have done to deliver education, particularly during the hiatus in which the Assembly was prevented from meeting for three years, and the ongoing work of education staff in particular. At the outset, I put on record that I support the motion and state that I also support the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to undertake an independent review of education. Within the next few weeks, I hope to bring to the Executive a paper with terms of reference and an outline of the way forward.

The other commitment, to set up an expert working group or panel on underachievement, as Mr Humphrey mentioned, will be brought forward at the same time so that we can move on the two commitments together. A number of Members also made the point that if we are looking for the best expertise, it should not simply be drawn from the world of academia. On both panels, there needs to be a broad range of people who can reflect the wider needs of society. Critical to that will be a high level of stakeholder engagement, both at an individual level and with various sectoral organisations. The major bodies in education need to have a role to ensure that there is the opportunity to have input from them.

Having said that I am content with the motion, I will turn to the two amendments. First, I am happy to support amendment No 1, which stands in the names of Ms Mullan and Ms Kelly. To be fair, its wording reflects entirely accurately the exactly wording in 'New Decade, New Approach'. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the Assembly adopt that amendment.

I have sympathy for some of Mr Carroll's remarks. In particular, I too want to see a resolution of the industrial action on teachers' pay. I also agree with him that there has been under-resourcing of education, and I want to lever in as much resource as I can. However, I cannot support his amendment, because it removes any reference to efficiency in the system. I appreciate that that may be a moot point, because his amendment and amendment No 1 are mutually exclusive. I appreciate that the Member takes a certain approach to how he interprets the word "efficiency". He looks at it not so much with rose-tinted glasses as red-tinted glasses. The reality is that we have to realise that there needs to be some reform in order to achieve efficiency. Indeed, I note that the Member for North Down Miss Woods said that part of the problem with our system is that there are inefficiencies in it. We cannot simply delete efficiency from any review, because that would mean that we are not necessarily spending the maximum amount of money on front-line services for our children. While I am sure that Mr Carroll's intentions are well meant, I will support amendment No 1 rather than amendment No 2.

All Members who spoke are in agreement that our education system faces significant challenges, and, if we are to continue to deliver world-class education, we need to reform, modernise and transform. We should always be looking to strive to improve services and deliver better outcomes for our children and young people. Even if we were entirely content with everything in the current system, we should always be looking for better. All good systems continually look at how they can improve that quality of provision and at good schools to bring that about.

We should not underestimate the task ahead, nor should we think that this review will be a panacea to the woes, real or perceived. The only way that we can bring about true reform is through building consensus, and that will be a critical aspect as we move ahead in delivering a managed programme of transformation. Education in Northern Ireland and elsewhere is sometimes a contested space, and change is inevitably a highly emotive issue. The former

Minister referred to one Member who was, on the one hand, urging the closure of a school but, on the other hand, lobbying to save it. That is just one example, but a non-political, non-sectoral and wholly independent review may be a good starting point, although expectations need to be managed. As I said, it is my intention to bring that to the Executive in the near future.

It is important that although we have highlighted a lot of the problems, we do not lose sight of the strengths of our education system, which we should promote and build on. We can be very proud of our school leaders, our teachers and our pupils. I know from my school visits that we have a well-trained and highly committed workforce, and our children and young people continue to achieve high levels of attainment. While we cannot and should not measure performance in education solely on exam results — valuable points were made about us looking for different vocational and non-academic pathways — we can be proud of the results that our young people achieve. International experience and evidence suggests that our primary and post-primary schools are performing well and demonstrate many of the features that underpin high attainment and equity. The attainment of pupils entitled to free school meals has continued to improve, and evidence from PISA 2018 points to the success of this approach in tackling educational underachievement.

Over the last number of years, we have seen a steady rise and improvement in our school performances, and while there is still a major issue around underachievement, we have seen the gap closing. There is a reduction in the gap between those who are on free school meals and those who are not. However, more needs to be done in closing that gap, hence the commitment in New Decade, New Approach for an expert panel for underachievement. Almost all our school-leavers progress into education, employment or training, and I acknowledge the hard work of the pupils and their teachers and school leaders for the positive outcomes being achieved across the system. Furthermore, the OECD identified the coherence of our school improvement policies as a key strength.

The education system faces many challenges, and issues around reform are well known and well understood, and the arguments are well rehearsed — for example, our schools and teachers are often being asked to deliver more and more but with fewer resources. It has been referenced that, from what is probably the high point of educational funding in 2010 and taking into account inflation and various pressures,

there is probably £245 million less in spending powers. More schools are in deficit, and more schools are in surplus. I concur with Mr Carroll that the statistics for 2010-11 compared with today mean that, albeit we now have a slightly larger school population, the actual spend per pupil is less than it was nine years ago. There have been fewer inflationary factors in education than elsewhere, but education has been hit by a range of national changes, particularly around pension changes and National Insurance.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. He mentioned the pressing need on school budgets — and I declare an interest, as I am on the board of governors of Braniel Primary School, which my children attend — but will he agree that one of the ways in which we can help to tackle that is to devolve additional powers over school budgets to head teachers, away from the centre?

Mr Weir: I agree with the Member. I will come to that in a minute or two. It is also important that we utilise our funding effectively and efficiently to build a system that is sustainable, particularly around the school estate through area planning. There needs to be changes, and some of those will be painful. Linked to the —

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I am a little pressed for time, so, unfortunately, I have to decline the wise words of intervention from the honourable Member for North Antrim.

Linked to the funding position is our network of schools. When we look at the network of schools, it is not simply about a cost-saving exercise; it is an educational policy that has had cross-party support down the years, which seeks to deliver the best education to all our children in highly sustainable schools.

In addition, our teachers have to deal with a wide range of increasingly complex needs. The pressures on young people are greater now than perhaps they have ever been. We have mentioned the increasing numbers of SEN issues.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I am sorry; I am a little pressed for time.

Mention has been made, which I will come back to in much greater detail at the Education Committee in a week's time, of the particular

problems that have been shown by the audit of the Education Authority.

The review will wish to consider all those challenges and, more importantly, make recommendations on potential solutions. It is important that Members realise that we have not been simply operating against a blank page. The Department has taken a proactive approach to addressing some of these challenges, even in the absence of devolution, through the establishment of a transformation programme. It is to be commended for commencing the work in the absence of an Assembly and Executive. The programme involves a series of projects, each tasked with developing options that transform an aspect of education. Those include school funding, school transport, statutory assessment, area planning, delivery of pupil support services and 14-19 pathways, as well as a number of other issues.

While that does not go as far as some would wish, it does present an opportunity for meaningful action to be taken. Mention of procurement was made by the Member for South Belfast. I want to see greater devolution of that to school principals. Issues around employment of teachers and around pathways are all critical, and, in seeing that work progress, we should not use the panel or, indeed, the review as some opportunity simply to kick that can of issues down the road. Where positive changes can be made, we need to embrace those simultaneously with the review.

With regard to the design of the review, we would need to agree what the review will consider, how it is undertaken and by whom. Mr O'Dowd referred to a number of reports on the local education system, so considerable work has already been done. We need to recognise that the problem is not just that the education system has not been reviewed; the problem is that, sometimes, we fail to agree implementation. So, it is important that the review builds on previous work. There is little value in simply replicating what was there before.

It is also important that we take into account the teacher, parent, child and stakeholder. They are central to the process. Ultimately, it is my preference that the review focuses on identifying evidence-based solutions that can be supported, rather than spending time stating problems that we already understand. It is also important that we have practical solutions and do not simply disappear down rabbit holes, which will involve years of disagreement.

Let me reiterate that I fully intend to deliver on the commitments of New Decade, New Approach and will bring forward proposals to the Executive shortly. However, we need to be realistic, first of all, about timescale. While there will be an urgency, it will take a short period at least to establish those panels, but if this job is to be done thoroughly, we are probably talking about a review that will take a year from its establishment to when it reports. It will be completed within this term, but it cannot simply be bounced through in a very short time. It is also important that much-needed work on transformation reform is not stalled. The review is unlikely to be the silver bullet for all the challenges that we face, and we must make sure that time is not wasted simply regurgitating what has been there before.

I would highlight that there are two potential traps that I sometimes see people falling into. One is seeing money as the solution to everything. Yes, there is a need for additional money, but anyone who says that and does not say that there is a need for change and reform deludes themselves. Also, those who see the review as the solution to everything and feel that it will deliver change without significant additional resources being brought into education similarly delude themselves. From that point of view, the remarks of the previous chief executive of the EA that it will require substantial investment and reform are correct. The two go together.

We have to focus on finding solutions to the challenges that we face, building consensus on the delivery of those actions and securing the necessary resources and commitment for education transformation. Our goal should be that every child has the absolute best start in life and that the education system is efficient, effective, sustainable and designed to deliver positive outcomes for every pupil. I look forward to hearing from Members from across the House, the Committee, educational stakeholders and children and young people as we deliver on that commitment.

12.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Gerry Carroll to make the winding-up speech on amendment No 2. The Member has up to five minutes.

Mr Carroll: It was a pretty wide-ranging debate on our education system, and lots of important points and issues were raised. I will try to refer to as many of them as I can in respect to my amendment.

There seemed to be some unanimity in recognising the important work done by our teachers and education staff. I welcome that and am sure that many teachers, education workers, their unions and so forth will also welcome that. I suppose that many of them will also ask why it has taken so long to resolve their pay disputes — so many years now. I very much doubt that many teachers or education workers pay close attention to the detail of amendments in Stormont, but would it not send a strong message to them if an amendment was accepted that stated that we support them in resolving their pay dispute? It would send out a strong message if we could do that today. For that reason, I appeal to Members to accept amendment No 2 in my name and not amendment No 1. A clear message should go out that we recognise the important work done by our teachers and education workers. Their contribution to society is invaluable. In recognising that, we should support a fair pay resolution for them.

The main reason that I tabled my amendment was to remove the part of the motion that mentioned "efficiency". The Minister referred to people having different definitions of efficiency, but some of the comments made by Members reaffirmed my suspicions, fears and worries and my reason for tabling the amendment. We heard talk of the need to take tough and hard decisions and reduce wastage. For me and our party, that is worrying, and, to many outside this Building, it is code for a reduction in services, cutbacks and closures and no increase in funding. Again, the reason I tabled the amendment was to challenge those points.

The Minister recognised the lack of spending and the decrease in spending per head of population. He gave a figure of several hundred million pounds as the real-term reduction in education funding over the last few years.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Briefly, yes.

Mr Weir: Again, I think that there is a bit of confusion over the word "efficiency", which can be both economic and educational. For instance, if you have a very small primary school in which pupils from a number of year groups are taught by one teacher, the efficiency of that school might be questioned. Also, when you have such multi-year education, the educational outcomes can be questioned. It is generally not so bad when there is no particular difference and there is a composite class of two years; it is once you move beyond that. That is

an example where you can see efficiency with an educational driver.

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

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his intervention. That may be the case, but there is no disputing the fact that efficiency has been used for 10 years to reduce budgets and the money that goes to education. That is something that he made a passing reference to.

There was some discussion about the future design and make-up of our education system, particularly integrated education. We in People Before Profit support and welcome an integrated education system. Ultimately, it should be secular.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will not, sorry. I only have a few minutes. Sorry, who was that? Ms Mullan?

Ms Dillon: It was me.

Mr Carroll: Sorry, I will continue. It is deeply troubling that people are educated separately on the basis of their religion. There was discussion about the Irish language sector during the debate. The point has to be made that Irish language education is important in our society. It contributes a lot and has an important role to play. My constituency is the fastest growing urban Gaeltacht. Those schools should be supported and, if they so wish, expanded. Irish-medium education is not the bogeyman or the reason why our schools are underfunded, not to mention the wealth of research that backs up the benefits of dual or multilingual education.

I support Rachel Woods's comments about the need to move away from an education system based on academic selection and exams generally. Our young people are under massive pressure to study, work hard and go through exam after exam. It has a massive impact on their mental health. Surely, we can move towards a different kind of education system, one that does not see education simply through the prism of how many A or A* grades young people get but supports their nurturing and development.

I encourage Members to support my amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Catherine Kelly to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 1. You have five minutes.

Ms C Kelly: Our education system is obviously broken. That has been evident recently in the treatment of children with special educational needs. The amendment is simply about bringing the motion back into line with the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I acknowledge the consensus in the Chamber among all Members who have spoken. They all referred to the crisis in finance, special educational needs and area planning, to name but a few issues. That highlights the need for the Assembly and Executive to bring about a radical review of our education system.

The education of our children and young people is too important to mess with. Reform of education provision is too important for us to undermine progress by even the appearance of messing about. The agreement tasked the Executive to "establish an external, independent review" and set a goal:

"of moving towards a single education system."

That remains the best way forward. It is based on agreement and on recognition of how challenging reform is likely to be.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. In the event of a report that said that a single education system would include Irish-medium, integrated, maintained, controlled and whatever other system, would the Member and the party opposite accept that as a single education system for Northern Ireland?

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

Ms C Kelly: We have to be conscious that a lot of discussion must take place. We have heard from many Members about the importance of the maintained, controlled and Irish-medium sectors. The review would be based on a determination to overcome difficulties by ensuring that there was full confidence in that review and by safeguarding the pieces that we have got right.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is soon to set up an expert panel on underachievement and a review of education. I agree wholeheartedly that we need investment alongside the review. As John said, our future education system should be inclusive, not exclusive.

I urge Members to support amendment Nos 1 and 2.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Kellie Armstrong to wind up the debate on the substantive motion. You have up to 10 minutes.

Ms Armstrong: I hope that I will not take the full time. The reason why the Alliance Party tabled the motion was frustration. Today is 10 March. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document was published on 10 January, and it made it clear that a Programme for Government should be published within two weeks of the restoration of the institutions. That has not happened. Page 43 of that document, as Mr Allister pointed out, states:

"The education system has a diversity of school types, each with its own distinctive ethos and values."

We know that, and we thank those who work in those systems. I pay tribute to them not just for their excellence in their work but the fact that they struggle to get by with what they have.

It is also stated on page 43 that the system is not sustainable. I remind Members that:

"The parties acknowledge the progress made in developing new models of sharing, cooperation and integration. There is a desire to build on this as a basis for delivering long term improvements in the quality, equity and sustainability of the system."

Ms Dillon: Thank you for giving way. On a fact-checking point, Mr Allister stated that Irish-medium education prevented integration: Irish-medium education can be non-denominational. I know that from experience, because my daughter is taught through the medium of Irish and there are children from a Protestant background at her school.

Ms Armstrong: I do not argue with the Member on that.

Page 43 of the document continues:

"The parties agree that the Executive will commission and oversee an independent fundamental review with a focus on quality and sustainability. The educational experience and outcomes for children and young people are the most important factors."

When we were discussing that in the talks period, a number of people said to me, "You're never going to get this in, Kellie. This will never work. There are too many vested interests". I have to say that there are. We have some excellent school systems, but we simply cannot afford them any more. We cannot afford them for two reasons: it is not just the financial aspect but the damage that it does to our children. While Mr Newton and others have said that we have a fantastic school system, we do, but only for some. We have special educational needs provision that, the Education Authority has already admitted, has been failing. We have children being left on school buses. We have other children, as Mr Allister pointed out, receiving different levels of funding depending on which type of school they go to.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. She comes to the heart of the issue. There is no segregation in special schools. We do not have maintained special schools, controlled special schools or Irish-medium special schools: we have special schools. Of course, there are reasons why some sectors do not want to have to pay the burden for special schools. Does the Member accept that 50% of the schools in the integrated movement, which is now a sector the same as the rest, are not integrated? The majority of those who go are from one community, and, of course, they get round the tables by getting people to tick the "Other" box. There is a lot of very inventive accounting going on, and it needs to come to an end.

Ms Armstrong: The Member makes an important point.

Ms Bailey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Let me make this argument, and then I will come back to you.

The Member brings me back to my point: nowhere in the Alliance motion will you see the words "integrated education". The Alliance Party and I are more interested in integrating education for the benefit of our young people and the staff who work in those schools. Why are we, as adults, pushing our segregation down the throats of children? If CCMS offers a fantastic education system, let us get the best parts of it and bring it into the system. The same applies to the controlled sector, the integrated sector or any sector. It is time that we stopped spending so much money propping up organisations in order to maintain segregation and looked back at what there should be: an education system that is fit for all.

We have already agreed some of the terms, Minister. The reason we pointed you out in the motion as opposed to the Executive is that the Executive, for two months, have not moved on this. When you are bringing forward terms and conditions, I will remind you to look at the footnote on page 43, which defines what "education" means. It is the full gamut of education; it is not just the schools. It looks at nursery provision and further education. It also looks at teachers, sectoral bodies and the curriculum — the whole gamut.

Can we please now have some bravery in the House? Bengoa was tough. I put it to each and every one of you that this will be the toughest thing that the Assembly will ever face, because there are a massive number of vested interests in education across Northern Ireland. One of the Members to my left — I apologise; I am not sure who it was — said that the head teachers were not pleased: that is a vested interest. Everyone should have their say in the consultation. It needs to be independent so that the independent person can make sure that all those voices are brought forward.

12.30 pm

I say to every Member in the House that we are failing some of our children in society by not having an education system that is fit for all. I ask every one of you to stop for a moment and consider the fact that we have already agreed to have such a system in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Are we already saying that that document is a failure? No, we are not. We are saying that we are going to take forward reform. We are simply asking the Minister to bring terms of reference to the Executive. He indicated in his response that he will be doing that, for which I thank him. We look forward to seeing the terms of reference very soon, because a review of education is not something that we can wait on. As you rightly say, Minister, it will take a substantial amount of time to create the report. It may then take 15 to 20 years to change our education system to meet its recommendations. As well as time, it will take the belief of everyone in the House to support an education system that will be fit for the future.

We have children who are coming out of education at the moment. Some go to university. Some are lucky enough to go into jobs. Some go on to further education. However, many of our children come out without qualifications. What is happening to them? They are being left behind, and many of those young people have special educational needs. That is a poor measurement of our

society. Why are we not protecting those people who need us the most, to ensure that they have a lifelong pathway whenever the options that we take for granted are not available to them?

Segregation and separation of children is something that I absolutely believe is wrong. Justin McNulty said that he is a Catholic who went through the Catholic education system and that he understands diversity. I am sorry, but I have to disagree. I am a Catholic who went through the Catholic education system, and, other than for the fact that I had a mixed family, I never came across diversity through my school. It talked to me about it but did not include me with it. I completely respect the Member when he says that the Catholic education system is a good system. I am a product of it, so I have to agree. However, we must take the best of that system and the best of everything else and bring it all together to create a system that is so much better.

I say this to all as well: it needs to be an inclusive system. I will remind Members that, in building an inclusive society, we need to think about LGBT, Catholic/Protestant, all faiths and those of no faith.

Miss Woods: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: I will indeed.

Miss Woods: Does the Member agree that the Executive's failure to amend legislation to ensure that schools take account of section 75 has contributed to the negative stereotyping of LGBTQ students and has had some negative effects on their well-being?

Ms Armstrong: I have to agree with Miss Woods, but we have even more problems than that, given that the Fair Employment (Monitoring) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 define community by binary means and do not take into account any section 75 obligations.

We have to think that an inclusive system is one that includes disabilities, and a way of doing that is through our school system. We cannot do that while our school estate is no longer fit for purpose, so the review is critically needed. We included the word "inclusive" in the motion. The Cambridge Dictionary definition gives this example:

"An inclusive group or organization tries to include many different types of people and treat them all fairly and equally."

By comparison, the Cambridge Dictionary definition of the word "single" is, "one only".

Our school system comprises wonderful young people who are taught by wonderful teachers, and we are letting them down by taking £100 million a year out of the system to maintain segregation.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that if amendment No 1 is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to implement urgently the New Decade, New Approach commitment to establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Newton: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that access to good quality and affordable childcare can help empower those parents who want to stay and progress in paid work; accepts that this, in turn, will contribute to the local economy; recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child; supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; further recognises that there are significant pressures already on the budget of the Department of Education; and calls upon the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable this to proceed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to desist from conversations, which prevent other Members from hearing what is being said. If you wish to have conversations that are going to distract, please leave the Chamber.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate.

The Member will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I greatly appreciate those words.

I hope that the motion can be accepted across the Chamber. It is a positive motion, drawn up to support parents, children and the economy. It is, therefore, holistic in its approach.

The motion has a number of key phrases that I draw to Members' attention. It calls for:

"access to good quality and affordable childcare".

It seeks to empower parents by allowing them to continue to work, and, therefore, to progress in their work. It:

"recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child [and] supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds".

I do not like the phrase the "cost of education". I like the phrase "investment in education". We are seeking, through the motion, investment in our children, families and wider society. The motion encapsulates the thinking of the Programme for Government in the New Decade, New Approach agreement's childcare strategy.

I want to make comparisons between Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK. In England, all three- to four-year-olds are entitled to 570 hours of free provision per year. That is typically taken as 15 hours per week over 38 weeks. In England, that is referred to as the universal entitlement. In addition, since September 2017, three- and four-year-olds with working parents are entitled to a free nursery place equivalent to 30 hours per week over 38 weeks. That is referred to as the extended entitlement.

In Scotland, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 introduced the term "early learning and childcare" for provision for children up to school age. Beyond childcare, this recognises a child's preschool period as early education, where a child acquires the skills and knowledge required to succeed in primary school and beyond. It is, therefore, a building block. The Act increased the flexibility and

amount of free early learning and childcare from 475 to 600 hours per year for all three- to four-year-olds. It also extended the entitlement to two-year-olds who are looked after under what is referred to as the kinship order or whose parents qualify for certain benefits. These children are entitled to free early learning and childcare from the first term after their second birthday.

The Scottish Government have since committed to almost doubling the number of funded early learning childcare (ELC) hours. From August 2020, all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds will receive 1,140 hours of funded early learning childcare. Prior to August 2020, some children, especially those living in disadvantaged areas, will be able to access those extended hours as local authorities phase in the delivery of the 1,140 hours. They have recognised, through their work, that children living in disadvantaged areas need that level of support.

The Welsh Government have set targets to expand and develop government-funded early years education in childcare in recent years. As a result, all three- and four-year-olds are now entitled to a free part-time place, which is available for a minimum of 10 hours per week for 38 weeks of the year. The Welsh Government also plan to extend this offer so that, by September 2020, the entitlement for working parents will be 30 hours per week over 48 weeks, and parents can choose to pay for additional provision on top of the free part-time provision that they receive.

Back in 2015, the then First Minister, Peter Robinson, and deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, announced their 10-year strategy for affordable and integrated childcare. That strategy had seven key objectives. The then First Minister and deputy First Minister indicated that they wanted to support:

"• Childcare services that are available to all children, regardless of where they live, their needs or circumstances with a registered and appropriate childcare place for every child that requires one".

They wanted:

"• Childcare services that are affordable—no longer taking a disproportionate share of average household incomes".

They also had objectives to see:

- "• Childcare settings that aim to become sustainable, able, eventually, to cover their costs from the fees they charge;*
- Childcare settings that foster lifelong respect for diversity, thereby laying the foundations for a more tolerant and inclusive future;*
- Childcare services that are of high quality, meeting or bettering the current minimum standards and with all staff and managers trained to the appropriate level;*
- Detailed and up to date information on the childcare sector that is readily available to parents, allowing them to make informed choices regarding the childcare services they use; and*
- Childcare services that are integrated with, and complementary to, educational and youth services."*

Too often in the past, we have been guilty of recognising the importance of childcare and the building block that it can be for the future of the child, the family and society, yet, at the same time, trying to address the issue through short-term project-funding.

We have tried to address it through community initiatives that rely on funding and have a set finish time. We have relied on schemes that can bring on board only limited numbers. We cannot continue in that vein if we believe that childcare is an important aspect of the development of the child and, indeed, society.

12.45 pm

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I will give way to the Member.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for bringing forward the motion and his comments thus far. He referred to the appropriate level. Wild statements about our education system being broken were made in the previous debate. Everything has to be the extreme in this place. Does he accept that integral to ensuring the best outcome for our pupils and young people is that the education process, rather than what is the case in some places, where it does not start until six or seven, starts at the earliest possible age? Childcare provision and early learning is all integral to ensuring the best outcome for our young people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members to address the Chair —

Mr Storey: Apologies.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): — and to make sure that their microphone is pointing towards them rather than away from them, because it can create some difficulties in picking up what is being said.

Mr Newton: I concur with what the Member said. What we have in this motion indicates that that holistic, joined-up and complete approach is necessary if we are to succeed.

We need to look at why change is needed. I go back to what was said about the other parts of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has the lowest proportion of households receiving free childcare across the whole of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has the second-lowest public spending on childcare provision in the United Kingdom.

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

Mr Newton: It has fallen behind Wales. We need to at least play catch-up and, hopefully, take a stride forward and even become the best in the United Kingdom.

Ms C Kelly: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all between "help" and "accepts" and insert:

"tackle disadvantage and poverty by closing the educational gap between the most and least advantaged children, can empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work, and those who want to return to education or training;"

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms C Kelly: The provision of affordable and appropriate childcare is fundamental to our social infrastructure. It is as important for our economy as investment in the construction of our roads. It can be a pathway to early learning. It can close the educational gap between our most- and least-advantaged children. The development of skills and acquisition of education by our children and young people now will grow our economy in the future.

Access to childcare can also create a pathway for parents to enter the workforce. It can increase their participation in employment or

help them acquire additional qualifications, skills or training to progress their career. It can increase the involvement of women in employment, giving them financial independence and the status that paid participation in the workforce can secure. It can help single parents who are struggling to rear and provide for their children at the same time or provide additional help for parents of children with disabilities. It can support other less-advantaged groups in our community, such as minority ethnic or migrant families. Access to affordable and appropriate childcare can mitigate the poverty that is currently experienced by many hard-pressed working families who are struggling to make ends meet.

Given the obvious benefits, it is hard to understand why it is taking so long for all of us here to develop and implement a childcare strategy. Tyrone and Fermanagh are two largely rural and border counties with little to no childcare provision. I live in west Tyrone, and I hear from mummies and daddies every day about how difficult it is to find a registered childminder or a preschool place. Grannies and grandas are using their retirement to provide informal childcare for their grandchildren, stepping into the breach of our collective policy failure.

I worked previously in Naíscoil na gCrann in Omagh, and felt and witnessed at first hand the immense pressure on our childcare practitioners. Reliance on the dedication, rather than the rewarding, of any workforce is unsustainable. Substantial investment in childcare would have a domino effect and shape the future of the sector. It would empower childcare providers and allow the workforce to grow.

Across the North, many people, mostly women, have given up the profession for which they were trained because of the proscriptive cost of childcare. As we all face the challenge of coronavirus, it is worth noting that many of those parents are trained health professionals, nurses and social care workers who, if childcare was affordable and accessible, could return to work and increase the capacity in our health service. I urge Members to support the amendment to the motion.

Ms Mullan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I will begin with a few remarks on behalf of the Committee for Education. The childcare strategy was one of the first, and one of the most important, policy areas that the Committee considered since it was formed in January. The Department of Education has had responsibility for early years

educational provision for some time. However, childcare was added to the Department's portfolio only after the Fresh Start Agreement.

I do not think that anyone will disagree with the sentiments of the motion. We can all assert that good childcare has a transformative role:

"in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child".

It also complements early intervention strategies such as Sure Start and measures such as extended schools and nurture groups.

When officials came before the Committee a few weeks ago, they talked about up-to-date research and the practices in other jurisdictions. The options appear to include a new childcare offer of 15 hours or 30 hours for all or some three- and four-year-olds. Two-year-olds, it seemed, might also be included. Indeed, there has even been consideration of the wider ambition to extend care to children in other age groups. Some work on that has been taken forward through Bright Start and other funding streams.

The Department has asked for £15 million in 2020-21 for childcare. However, it explained that, depending on the options selected, it might need anywhere between £1 million and £50 million in the next financial year. As we await the Budget for the next year, I encourage the Executive to view the childcare strategy as a priority and allocate resources accordingly. When that happens, it will be important for the Department to set out and explain the options to the Committee and to stakeholders. It will also be important to assure ourselves that educational and development objectives for children are being met, as well as the employment benefits for parents.

I hope that, at the end of the debate, the Education Minister will provide information on the Department's views on the relative value of part-time versus full-time provision, as well as updating us on the interim evaluation and future funding position of Bright Start. Finally, I ask the Minister to tell us about the nature and timing of the legislation that he will need to introduce in order to give effect to the childcare strategy.

Speaking as a Sinn Féin MLA, I will now add a few words in support of the amendment. Childcare must be more affordable and accessible. Sinn Féin's aspiration is to have a universal, high-quality system of childcare. Childcare is crucial for parents who wish to remain in employment and to those who want to enter employment, education or training. A few

weeks back, at the Committee, I raised concerns with Education Authority and departmental officials about the lack of support for community preschool facilities and the removal of funding. I know of at least two facilities in my constituency that, despite operating for 30 or 40 years, now face closure. Minister, I ask that you relook at that practice immediately. Otherwise, when we finally get a strategy in place, we will not have the childcare facilities to provide this vital service.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, the Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. The debate on the motion will resume after Question Time, when the next contribution will be from Sinead McLaughlin.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.55 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Topical question 7, in the name of Mr Gerry Kelly, has been withdrawn. There are no grouped questions in this session.

SEN Statements: Waiting List

1. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Education how many children are awaiting a statement of special educational needs (SEN). (AQO 309/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I am interpreting this as a question about the number of referrals to the Education Authority (EA) for a statutory assessment, where a statutory assessment may result in a statement or a note in lieu of a statement. The latest figures that we have, as of 28 February 2020, are that 2,081 children are undergoing a statutory assessment.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his answer. I declare an interest, as I have a relative who is going through the process. From the engagement that I have had with parents whose children are involved in the special educational needs assessment process, it has been indicated to me that communication between them and the Education Authority has been abysmal. Will the Minister undertake to review how the Education Authority communicates with parents to keep them updated on assessments?

Mr Weir: As the Member is probably aware, a wider review was done by way of an internal audit of the Education Authority. That produced an internal audit report, which was, by common parlance, fairly damning and resulted in a range of recommendations.

Obviously, first of all, as a Department, we will ensure that there is proper delivery of those recommendations, and there will need to be a clear-cut role for the Department, although it is up to the EA to provide that delivery. At the heart of that, there have been considerable problems in communication — that is one of the areas that we need to improve on — and prior

to being in post I, too, experienced difficulties with communications on SEN with the EA. This is a subject that I will be going into greater detail on at the Education Committee; I think I am due to appear in front of it on Wednesday week.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Minister agree that the findings of the audit of the EA's assessment and support process for children with special educational needs demonstrates a systemic failure of those children? Does he also agree that nothing less than an independent review of the EA is now necessary?

Mr Weir: I want to consider the best way to go forward. The review's report was, as I said, very damning. The Member mentioned a full independent assessment. Understandably, when the EA launched its internal audit, there was suspicion that it would be some sort of whitewash and there would not be a proper investigation. It is fairly clear from reading the full report that the audit team went into this thoroughly and with a critical eye. What is particularly important is that the recommendations are put in place. The report also lists a range of immediate actions. While, ultimately, it is for the EA to implement those, I will be looking at ways in which the Department can have a direct role in ensuring that the EA is held to account on them. We will have to monitor the situation as time goes on, but I think the EA has to be given some opportunity to correct many of the mistakes that have been made and show that there has been clear improvement.

Ms Mullan: Further to your answer, Minister, to the Chairperson of the Education Committee and given the EA's internal audit report, which was presented to the Committee last week, what action will your Department take to ensure that there is no repeat of the failings identified into special educational needs practices?

Mr Weir: We will work alongside the Education Authority. The EA should be given an opportunity to implement the report's recommendations, but it cannot simply be left to its own devices. There is a duty of care on all of us to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society, particularly children with special educational needs, are properly served. The report showed a catalogue of problems and mistakes. There are direct recommendations that arise from the report, so the issue is about ensuring that they are brought to fruition. There is a key role for the Department to make sure that, working alongside the EA, those are put

into effect. Again, I am sure that that will be dealt with in greater depth next week.

Shared Education: Funding

2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education to outline the current available funding for cross-border shared education projects. (AQO 310/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Peace IV Programme currently provides funding for shared education partnerships in Northern Ireland, in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland and on a cross-border basis. Two projects are funded. The first is the collaboration through sharing in education project and is for primary, post-primary and special schools. The project has a budget of €28.9 million, plus up to a further €2 million to provide for additional support for shared education partnerships. The second is the sharing from the start project and is for early-years settings. It has a budget from the EU of €4.26 million.

The funding will continue until the end of the 2021-22 academic year, so it is guaranteed up until June 2022. The programme does not stipulate amounts of funding to be spent on partnerships in each jurisdiction and cross-border. Funding is allocated annually to successful applicant partnerships over each of the five years of the programme. Partnerships can include arrangements between schools that are in Northern Ireland, between schools that are in the Republic of Ireland — provided that they are in border counties — and between schools in the North and schools in the South.

Mr Lynch: The Minister will no doubt agree that the cross-border shared education projects and the relationships that they create are highly valuable. Does he intend to maintain that level of funding after exiting the EU?

Mr Weir: We are waiting to see precisely what the arrangements will be post-Brexit. There have already been indications from the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) that it would like to see such projects continuing. To some extent, the question is this: how will they be funded after the Peace IV programme concludes? As I indicated, it will be ending in 2022. However, a new cross-border Peace Plus programme has been announced for 2021-27. It is the successor to Peace IV and INTERREG and will be funded jointly. I think that there has been acceptance of that by both the EU and the UK Government. The SEUPB is leading on the development of that programme with input from

the Governments, North and South, and other stakeholders.

We are in the process of co-designing a programme, and Department of Education officials are engaging with their opposite numbers in the Department of Education and Skills as part of the process. A range of proposals is under consideration for possible inclusion in the programme, including shared education for schools, early years and youth. The programme will also have a cross-border element.

Ms Armstrong: I ask the Minister to go further and tell us how much is being spent from the Fresh Start budget on shared education and integrated education, how much is planned to be spent and how much will be left over.

Mr Weir: There will not be any money left over. It is indicated in New Decade, New Approach that flexibility is guaranteed, so we need to tease that out with Treasury. The aim is to spend all of the £500 million. We have projects that are designed to ensure that the money is fully realised. Part of the complication with the spend to date arose out of the initial parameters that Treasury placed on the programme, whereby projects had to come entirely from a fresh call. Any projects previously announced were not able to be funded. Projects had to consist of a full capital programme, and the money could be spent only at the time in which it was allowed to be spent. That is the case with any major capital programme. For example, for a full school build, almost none of the money will be available in the first year. It will probably take a few years.

That led to a level of frustration. Under the confidence and supply arrangement, that was successfully renegotiated, because end-year flexibility created the danger of money being lost, particularly for early-years provision. There is still a little bit of work to do to tie down what is in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The document gives indications that there is still a commitment from the Government to ensure that flexibility. We are still scoping out all the details and working with our colleagues in the Department of Finance, because the nature of capital builds, whenever finance for particular projects is ring-fenced, will at times result in an uneven spread.

In the first few years, there will be years in which the full £50 million will not be able to be spent. Indeed, initially, very little was able to be spent, but, in some subsequent years, much more than £50 million will be needed. We want to make sure that every penny of that is

delivered, which is why, with a range of projects going ahead, we believe that we have enough projects to fill that. There is always the opportunity for an additional call if there is a need to absorb any additional money, but we believe from the profiling that there will not be anything particular to spend. We have probably slightly overcommitted to ensure that, if there are any problems, that can at least mean that the full amount will be spent.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I gently remind the Minister of the two-minute rule. You can have an additional one if you ask for it.

Mr Weir: I am suitably chastised.

Coronavirus: Schools

3. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Education what powers a school principal has if there are concerns about an outbreak of coronavirus in their school. (AQO 311/17-22)

Mr Weir: In exceptional circumstances that are entirely outside the control of the school, schools can apply to the Department for a reduction in the number of days they are required to operate; that is known as exceptional closure. Guidance for schools is contained in the Department's circular 2019/13, including details of the online application process developed by Departments to assist schools in this process. On receipt of an application, the Department will decide on a case-by-case basis whether an exceptional closure should be granted. I should emphasise that, whilst the situation regarding coronavirus is changing very quickly, current Public Health Agency (PHA) advice is that schools should remain open unless there is direction to close. However, as time moves on, we are living in a fairly exceptional circumstance, and cognisance will be taken of that in any decision. We will look at each individual case, and it might well be that events move on in such a way that there will be a change in approach to exceptional closures.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister. Will he outline what steps he is taking to keep schools and parents informed of developments?

Mr Weir: Part of that is to ensure that people get the correct advice and get it from a single source. On 27 September, I wrote out to all principals and education sector partners enclosing the link to the PHA website, because it is important that school hygiene advice and health advice comes directly from the PHA.

That is being updated as the situation develops, and we have emphasised the importance of monitoring the website regularly.

For travel advice, the source is largely the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and, once there has been a change, we have notified schools as soon as it was practicable. On Sunday evening, for instance, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office took a different approach to northern Italy. People were notified of that before lunchtime yesterday. Again, last night, the position changed for Italy as a whole, and people have been notified about that.

The updated Chief Medical Officer advice was included in the email to schools, and I know that a number of schools have taken advantage of the opportunity of a conference call with the Chief Medical Officer and the Public Health Agency. My Department continues to communicate with our education sector by issuing communications, issuing the links and providing the self-isolation advice leaflet to the education sector. I have also made sure that the PHA website link is prominently displayed on the DE website. Given the health implications, there is close cooperation between my Department and the Department of Health, and there are also liaisons with other Education Departments throughout these jurisdictions.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Several Members have indicated that they wish to ask a supplementary question. Mindful of Mr Speaker's ruling at the start of the week, I will not be able to get to everyone, so please bear with me and forgive me if I do not get to you. Mr Colm Gildernew was the first on his feet.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for the work that he has been doing, and I appreciate the work that his Department, teachers, schools and staff have been doing at this difficult time. What are the circumstances of this outbreak that would require school closures?

Mr Weir: We will be very much driven by the medical advice, and sometimes that will be because of the potential threat to students. In the case where it has happened on a temporary basis, there is no indication of community transmission. Indeed, at the moment, the health advice is that none of the cases in Northern Ireland has come by way of community transmission. I want to reassure parents in that case that there is no direct threat to their children; it is important to state that.

An exceptional closure can take place, for example, when it is felt that, on the advice of

the Public Health Agency, it is important to have a deep clean of the school. In the Newtownhamilton case, the advice of the Public Health Agency was to close both the school affected and the adjoining school — the high school and the primary school — until the end of this week to allow a deep clean to be done. None of the pupils is being tested. We will follow that exceptional closure advice or, indeed, any other advice that comes from the Public Health Agency. It is important that there is a health driver. However, I suspect that, as things move on, circumstances will move on as well.

2.15 pm

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's words of reassurance. That is important.

As the Minister is aware, the Education Authority has access to a rich bank of good supply teachers. Are there any backup systems in place, however, to ensure that schools can continue to operate in the event that non-teaching staff are unable to work?

Mr Weir: The Member makes a couple of points. There is a bank of supply teachers. We will look to see whether any flexibility with regard to non-teaching staff is required and provide support for that. It will reach a point where we need to look at that, depending on how far and wide the virus has spread. There are also opportunities through the EA and C2k for remote learning. We want to have a full gamut of opportunities. That is why it is particularly significant that the Government are putting through legislation centrally that will give Departments a range of powers. Those are powers that, I am sure, a lot of us hope do not have to be exercised. Certainly, the Department of Education and other Departments in Northern Ireland have asked for maximum powers so that we are not caught on the hop or put in a situation where we have to react to particular circumstances and then find that we do not have the powers to do so. We will adapt our actions depending on circumstances and, again, following that expert advice.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Paula Bradshaw.

Ms Bradshaw: My question has been answered, thank you.

Mrs Cameron: Does the Minister agree that it is vital that, if teachers, pupils or parents have concerns about the coronavirus, their first port of call should be the 111 number, selecting

option 1 when they get through for the Northern Ireland helpline, and, indeed, if they are symptomatic, they should ring their GP or out-of-hours GP for advice? If need be, that GP can then refer them to the pod for testing.

Mr Weir: In the light of the earlier remonstrations from the Principal Deputy Speaker, I am tempted to say that the answer is, "Yes", but, to elaborate, it is important that people follow the correct advice; that they go through the NHS helpline, which is there to provide that information; and that they behave responsibly. There is particular advice for anybody who suspects that they are infected, which is to self-isolate and contact their GP. If somebody has a concern, it will not help if they suddenly rush to a hospital A&E department, because that risks community transfer.

At the moment, we are still in the containment phase. At some point, we may move to the delay phase. All the experts say that the more it is contained and delayed, the better the opportunities that gives for hospitals to deal with it and for people to find solutions to the problem. That is the responsible route for everyone, irrespective of whether they are a pupil, a teacher or a parent.

Carrickfergus Academy: Investment

4. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education, following his visit to Carrickfergus Academy in February 2020, for his assessment of the requirement for significant investment to provide modern facilities for the school. (AQO 312/17-22)

Mr Weir: During my visit to Carrickfergus Academy, I was able to hear at first hand about some of the difficulties that the school has encountered as a result of having to operate on a split site following the amalgamation of Carrickfergus College and Downshire Community School. I can confirm that an application was submitted by the Education Authority on behalf of Carrickfergus Academy under the recent call for major capital projects, which closed on 31 October 2019. As that is still a live process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on a new build for Carrickfergus Academy at this time. I do hope, however, to be in a position to make a major capital announcement of schemes to advance in planning in the next couple of months.

In the meantime, the school continues to avail itself of minor improvement works, which is another strand of the capital investment strategy. In the last three years, in the region of

£74,000 has been spent on minor works across the junior and senior campus sites. Sixteen minor works applications were submitted by the school under the last minor works call in October 2017, and eight of those applications are currently being assessed. If approved, that would bring an additional investment for the school.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer and, indeed, for coming to Carrickfergus Academy. Will he accept that there is a need for an early concept layout for a new school and a new plan in the area, given that potential investments are needed for road safety improvements that are required to the entrance and, indeed, other investments such as a 2G pitch, so that there is a good layout that will stand not only for the short term but for any long-term investment in the site?

Mr Weir: Obviously, there are restrictions on what I can say. The Member has made his point well. Clearly, there are schools throughout Northern Ireland that are very deserving of that level of capital investment, and that will be part of the process. At the meeting, I was also struck by the fact that this will need to be examined in a broader sense. While this was focusing on the capital requirements, I appreciate very much that schools that operate on split sites face particular additional resource difficulties. As we move ahead in any examination of the common funding formula, it is important to see whether those are being properly addressed, notwithstanding the overall problem that there is not enough money in the system as a whole. The problems and some of the pressures that are faced by Carrickfergus Academy are not unique to that school; we have seen it happen with other amalgamated sites. We need to bear that in mind when considering what resources can be put in place, and everyone will need to be cognisant of that as we look into area planning and split-site solutions. Generally speaking, they can only really be a short- to medium-term solution, not a long-term solution.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his visit to Carrick Academy in recent weeks. I acknowledge the money that has been made available to keep the school ticking over in the meantime through minor works. When does the Minister intend to make an announcement on Carrick Academy?

Mr Weir: As I said, I suspect it will be in the next — we are expecting a major capital assessment and announcement within the next two months or so, so the successful schools will learn of that then. Obviously, that process was

started pre-devolution. In the meantime, there is an opportunity, as was mentioned. Although Carrick is in the major works programme and, if it were successful, would not be eligible for the school enhancement programme, that does not preclude minor works. A number of those are on track. As indicated, some of those have taken place, and others will happen. Particularly where there is a health and safety issue, that will always try to be addressed in the immediacy, even if a school ends up being successful in a major capital works programme.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister consider prioritising investment in some of the schools that operate out of temporary Portakabins?

Mr Weir: With both the school enhancement programme and the major capital works programme, there is an independent scoring mechanism that scores the applications. That considers the state of the buildings, whether it is a split site, whether it is helping area planning and the levels of temporary accommodation. All those, amongst others, are factors on which the scores are based. As the Member will appreciate, to take the school enhancement programme as an example, around 60 of those applications have been successful out of 165 initial applications. There has to be something that is fair between schools, because, in many ways, schools compete with each other for limited resources.

It is not the ideal situation to have temporary classrooms. I know that schools have been facilitated at times with temporary classrooms, but the old Portakabins from my time at school and maybe even from the distant days when Mr Boylan was at school are very different from the temporary classrooms that we have today. All those factors are taken into account in any assessment of the relative needs of schools.

Irish-medium Workforce Strategy

5. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans for a workforce strategy for the Irish-medium sector in order to increase the number of specialist subject teachers. (AQO 313/17-22)

Mr Weir: I should clarify that it is the responsibility of each employing authority to monitor and manage its workforce. That includes the Irish-medium sector. An employing authority can be the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) or the board of governors of a school, depending on its management type.

In February, I met the Irish-medium representative body, CnaG, which my Department funds. Therefore, I am aware of the sector's concerns about teacher supply, particularly at post-primary level, where subject specialists with appropriate Irish language ability and pedagogical skills in immersion education are being sought. My officials have been conducting a series of meetings with initial teacher education providers in the Irish-medium sector to understand the issues and the range of potential solutions. Teacher education goes beyond the Department of Education. Discussions have been taking place with the Department for the Economy on initial teacher education provision, because it would fund that.

I expect a series of options reflecting potential short-term and longer-term solutions to be developed for consideration. At this stage, I cannot pre-empt what the outcomes will be, not least given the potential resource implications that will need to be factored in.

Mr McGuigan: The Minister will be aware of the growth in Irish-medium education, with more and more pupils across the North accessing education through Irish. Given the growth and the increasing demand in the sector, particularly the growing number of children accessing their primary education through Irish, does the Minister agree that significant increased investment is required for Irish-medium post-primary education, including a workforce strategy?

Mr Weir: We will engage with CnaG on the workforce strategy to see what is fit for purpose. Part of the issue relates to longer-term solutions versus shorter-term solutions. Even if there were a change in the mix of teachers coming through initial teacher education, somebody starting in St Mary's, for instance, in September would not be a fully qualified teacher for a number of years. There will be other demands in different sectors. That will not necessarily meet the demand quickly, so we need to look at what other measures can be taken. The language upskilling of existing teachers is one route. The skills that exist in the broader workforce at present could be examined. It is about trying to make sure that every child gets what is needed for their education. As I said, options are being developed. That has to be done in conjunction with the sector to make sure that what is put forward is fit for purpose.

Mr Allister: The Minister said that, if and when options come before him, he will consider them in the context of the resource implications. In considering those resource implications, will he

reflect on the figures that I quoted this morning in the debate, which he supplied in answer to questions? Those figures indicate that the Irish-medium sector already receives 8% more per child than the allocation in the controlled sector and 6% more than the allocation in the maintained sector. That sector already has preference in the level of funding per child.

Mr Weir: I will take all issues into account. The resource implications for initial teacher education will be most acute for the Department for the Economy. While the Department of Education has a role in setting the numbers, it is, effectively, the Department for the Economy that picks up the tab.

There will be variations between sectors. In part, the figures will vary to a large extent from school to school. A higher proportion of Irish-medium schools are small, so they tend to be more expensive per pupil than other schools. That applies, I think, throughout the sectors.

While the figures that show the difference are there, it is not an even picture from school to school. We have to try to ensure that all our children are catered for in an equitable manner so that we can provide them with the best education that we possibly can.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have about 30 seconds. If Ms Kelly would like to ask her question, the Minister will answer, but there will be no time for a supplementary question.

Strule Shared Education Campus

6. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Education for a time frame for work to begin on Strule Shared Education Campus. (AQO 314/17-22)

Mr Weir: I remain fully committed to delivering this educationally and strategically significant programme. It represents a major capital investment in the west of Northern Ireland that will stimulate further development and regeneration of the region. The next stage of construction has been delayed due to tendering issues and the need for business case reapproval. My Department has completed a fundamental review of the construction programme, and I am giving that urgent consideration.

At this stage, the provisional opening of the campus is planned for September 2024 at the earliest. That is dependent on works

commencing by May 2021. The investment to date has delivered the design, construction and fit-out of Arvalee School and Resource Centre, the Strathroy Link Road to improve traffic flow to and from the campus, and extensive site preparation works. It has also delivered the designs for the core schools.

In terms of non-construction projects, work continues on the delivery of a range of shared education initiatives that are being developed and led by the schools. That will ensure that today's pupils have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of sharing and to play an important role in shaping future education delivery locally and regionally. While the procurement competition is currently suspended, it remains live, and, as a result, it would be inappropriate to comment further on the procurement process at this time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that that is called speed-reading. Well done. We now move to topical questions.

Area Planning: SEN Schools

T1. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Education for an update on area planning, specifically the proposals for the restructuring of special educational needs (SEN) schools in Belfast. (AQT 221/17-22)

Mr Weir: At this stage, area planning is continuing. There is a concern that, across the board, the overall speed and pace of area planning has not, perhaps, moved as quickly as it should have. I know that there is a wider situation. Broadly speaking, the aim of area planning, which can sometimes create a little delay, is to try to get all the sectors moving by taking a more coherent and joined-up approach. Getting them aligned is not always easy, and I know that that is a particular issue in Belfast.

The Member will be aware that the EA created proposals to deal with the special needs situation in Belfast. There was a considerable level of public representation on that and a feeling that what was put forward was not fit for purpose, and, effectively, the proposals were withdrawn. At this stage, nothing further has come forward from the EA, so as the managing authority it is up to it to consider where things stand. Obviously, we want to ensure that we have something that is absolutely fit for purpose, particularly for our special needs pupils. In Belfast, the configuration grew over a number of years in a slightly haphazard way. We need to recognise the sensitivities and ensure that people are not detached from

schools that they have had very strong connections with.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am glad to hear your commitment to special educational needs schools being fit for purpose. On the back of that, a number of parents have contacted me about the lack of communication from the EA. Will the Minister give a commitment or guarantee that the EA will directly communicate with parents of children who are attending special educational needs schools, in order to listen further to their concerns and engage them in the wider process?

Mr Weir: That is critical. I am a little restricted in what I can say, because, ultimately, this may lead to development proposals to which I would have to give a sort of legal verdict. While a lot of the thinking on previous proposals was very well-intended and virtuous, there was a clear problem with communication and a level of disengagement. While nobody is ever keen to see particular schools closed, notwithstanding the remarks of Mr O'Dowd earlier, it is clear that the more that the EA or anybody else who puts forward proposals can bring consensus and bring parents alongside, the better. Early communication before we reach the stage of a formal development proposal is critical, particularly for special educational needs.

Schools: Medical Interventions

T2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Education to outline the process in schools to deal with complex medical interventions, similar to the pathway that is in place for diabetes, given that, as he will be aware, more and more children with complex medical conditions are attending mainstream schools. (AQT 222/17-22)

Mr Weir: I know that that is an issue. The joint Department of Health and Department of Education policy document, 'Supporting Pupils with Medication Needs', provides a robust framework for enabling all children with medication needs to access the necessary support. All schools have access to that guidance, and funding was allocated to the EA to provide training to all school principals on how to meet pupils' medication needs. Principals are responsible for determining the training needs of their teachers and school staff, and they can avail themselves of the wide range of courses offered by the EA on all aspects of special educational needs, including one on diabetes. Training on dealing with health conditions, including complex medical

conditions, will also be provided by the relevant health and social care trust. Training will be in line with the pupil's individual healthcare plan and be subject to an ongoing review.

I am aware of the issues raised about mainstream schools. Having visited a special needs school last week, I am also acutely aware that there are concerns at times in those schools over whether the appropriate medical backup is there, particularly for children with complex needs. Given the importance of special educational needs, I have given a direction that at least one of the five training days should be directly allocated to special educational needs training. Obviously, what you have asked goes beyond that into a more specialist position.

Ms P Bradley: I know that that is not always how things work out in our mainstream schools. We are seeing an increase in medical interventions being required. Referrals have to be made, and I want the Minister to assure us that schools will get the assistance that they require so as not to disenfranchise children with complex medical needs.

Mr Weir: That is important. There has been a problem, particularly over the definition of special educational needs. Medical needs have in some ways been lumped in with them. That can sometimes mean that the person with medical needs has significant educational needs and is the most obvious person to be given assistance and statemented. In other cases, a person can have a strong medical need that does not lead to an educational need.

To be fair, this is the first year in which this has happened. In the categorisation in the school census, there has been a separation of those with specific special educational needs and those with direct medical needs. That will help identification. Support will be given by a diabetic or epileptic nurse specialist, but advice and guidance is available from both from the Education Authority and the school health service. As a result of the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015, good work has gone on at departmental level and at a higher level. We must ensure that the practice then permeates the system so that practitioners at the lowest levels are also involved in that joined-up approach to ensure that pupils' medical needs are fully taken into account.

School Trips: DE Ban

T3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education whether he will take a personal

decision to ban all overseas trips by schools. (AQT 223/17-22)

Mr Weir: The short answer is no. It should not be my opinion or that of the Department of Education that decides that. We may reach a point at which going five miles down the road may be more dangerous than going to a foreign country. We do not know how the situation will develop. I will be entirely driven by the expert advice from, on the one hand, the health authorities on what actions need to be taken in schools and, on the other hand, from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on travel. It has the expertise to give that advice. My advice to schools is to follow the Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice. That is the safest way.

If I were to say what I personally think or what the Department thinks, which might be a reinterpretation of that expert advice or, worse still, differing advice, I would be in danger of sending mixed messages to schools and of giving out the wrong information. That would be highly irresponsible and dangerous.

Mr McGlone: Is the Minister aware of research by Professor Mark Handley of University College London, who compared the rates of coronavirus infection in Italy, which is in crisis, with those in the UK, Germany, France, Spain, the US and Switzerland, and found that they are growing at the same rate? What advice is the Minister guided by? Is he aware of that specialist research? Is it wise for people to send their kids to hotspots of coronavirus outbreak?

Mr Weir: Yes, I have seen different advice and views publicised. It is important that we do not get a range or gamut of advice, because those who are compiling elements of research are not always on the same page; they do not always come to the same conclusion. It is important and responsible to remember that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is the single source of information for travel. That office gathers all the advice, and advises. The Executive will be working closely with the Public Health Agency on local health. That will mean the potential escalation of advice and information on action that needs to be taken. To pick and choose what academic research I base my views and advice on is the wrong approach. We need something that is focused on a single, clear piece of unambiguous advice, and we need to have a single source of advice. That is not only the best way forward but the only sensible approach that can be taken.

Battlefields Project

T4. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has a process to encourage or obtain a regional balance in the schools that are selected for the battlefields project. (AQT 224/17-22)

Mr Weir: The battlefields project has been ongoing in parts of the UK for a number of years. In Northern Ireland, it is administered by the Education Authority on behalf of the Department. Each post-primary school in Northern Ireland is invited to nominate two year 10 pupils and one teacher to take part in a study visit. Each study visit is made up of pupils and teachers from a wide cross section of post-primary schools. Where possible, priority is given to students who would not normally be able to avail themselves of such an opportunity. Schools from across Northern Ireland and all sectors and school types have participated in the visits. It is gratifying to note that one of the by-products of the project is not only a shared understanding of our shared history but a deepening of good relations and promotion of mutual understanding, which have been cited as positive outcomes for participants.

The EA will liaise with schools, but, given current events, I suspect that people will want to see how things develop before there is any commitment to a time frame for visits.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that youth projects that focus on our shared history, such as the schools' battlefields scheme, can be of great benefit in helping to grow understanding, respect and tolerance among young people from all sides of the community in Northern Ireland?

Mr Weir: All school sectors, and a wide range of schools, have taken part in this project. Such projects have an educational impact, and, while budgets are tight, they are of relatively low cost. The project has been an invaluable educational experience but, according to a lot of the feedback, it has been valued by the pupils and teachers who have taken part for the way in which it creates a level of mutual understanding and a greater level of respect, tolerance and friendship between the schools and pupils. Those are some of the intangibles that flow from such a project.

Exams: Coronavirus Contingency Plans

T5. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Education, given that exam time is not too far away, and in the event of the inevitable spread

of coronavirus, what contingency plans are in place to allow our students to sit their GCSEs and A levels. (AQT 225/17-22)

Mr Weir: We are working on getting detailed advice from CCEA, which is working with the exam regulators. I should point out that, while CCEA is the regulator of exams, it is also the supplier of the bulk of the exams. The market in Northern Ireland is also open to exam bodies from outside Northern Ireland, so it is important that we get a consistent approach. That approach will, then, be worked through by CCEA with the exam regulators that look after exams across the United Kingdom. CCEA is working with the exam regulators to scope out precisely the contingency plans that, potentially, could be put in place.

2.45 pm

At present, there are no plans to cancel exams, and we are working on an initial assumption that they will simply go ahead. However, that may be overtaken by events, and we will have contingency plans put in place. However, some of the detail of that is still to be worked out by CCEA because the matter does not lie entirely in CCEA's or, indeed, the Department's hands.

Ms McLaughlin: Has the Minister considered setting exams remotely, and is he investing further in C2k to make that possible?

Mr Weir: My understanding is that what EA has in place for C2k at present would enable remote learning and therefore, potentially, the opportunity for remote examinations to happen. I am not sure whether some additional resources would be required. That can be looked at and prioritised. There is a basis there for remote learning and, therefore, remote exams. We will scope out with CCEA and the exam regulators the best way to take that forward.

Where we are today, in March, may not be the position that we are in at the beginning of April, the beginning of May or the beginning of June. To some extent, a range of scenarios may have to be worked through by the Department. CCEA will be at the table for any discussions that the Department may have on contingency plans so that that aspect can be front and centre. Along with potential school closures, that is probably the most obvious area that might be affected by the coronavirus.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Education. I invite Members to take their ease for a moment.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Finance

Mr Speaker: Topical question 3 has been withdrawn, and there are no grouped questions.

Corporation Tax

1. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance under what economic and political circumstances he would recommend the reduction of corporation tax. (AQO 324/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): A cut in corporation tax would only be possible were it affordable, which it is not at this time, given the very constrained budgetary position that we face. In addition, the political and economic landscape has changed significantly since that commitment was included in the Stormont House Agreement in 2014. Since then, we have had Brexit, the headline British rate has been reduced and we have had successive years of austerity, which has further affected our ability to fund essential public services. Therefore, cutting corporation tax is not something that I am considering at this time.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. His party has championed tax harmonisation across the island for a number of years now. Given that he has abandoned plans to reduce corporation tax in the North, does he now support an increase in corporation tax in the South in order to harmonise the rate North and South?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that we are dealing with different economic circumstances, different availability of public finances and a different ability to raise our own revenues North and South. We are not comparing apples with oranges here. The reality is that that proposition was envisaged at a time when the rate in Britain was 21%. It was envisaged before Brexit and before the full cumulative impact of austerity made it, in my opinion as Finance Minister, unaffordable to the Executive. That remains my position.

Ms McLaughlin: Will the Minister confirm that the new fiscal powers for Northern Ireland are needed but must be made in the context of a properly thought-through economic strategy that seeks to deepen the all-island economy while also protecting trade with Britain?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I agree with the Member about that. Economic policy needs to be

carefully thought through, and we need to have sufficient data to make sure that economic policy is based on fact and evidence. I had a discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury this morning about our access to data.

Of course, I have signalled that I want to consider the creation of a fiscal commission that will look at the idea of additional economic and revenue-raising powers for the Executive. I intend to bring forward work on that in the near future.

Mr McCann: Has the Minister had any engagement with the British Treasury regarding air passenger duty?

Mr Murphy: I had engagement this morning, actually. I am just back from London. Along with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, we raised a range of issues, primarily around EU funding but also in relation to the Budget in Britain tomorrow. I raised with the Treasury the issue of air passenger duty and the impact it has on connectivity here. I ensured that the Treasury was aware of the particular challenges for regions like this with air passenger duty in relation to connectivity.

Civil Service: Mental Health Screening

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance what provision exists in the Civil Service to ensure that mental health screening takes place at the point of recruitment, during reviews of performance and when an employee leaves their post. (AQO 325/17-22)

Mr Murphy: While not limited to mental health, the Civil Service recruitment process provides the opportunity to request adjustments due to disability at the application, selection and appointment stages. Fitness-for-post assessments may also be carried out where a special level of fitness is required to carry out the duties of the post — for example, all prison grades.

In cases where mental health issues constitute a disability, line managers consider reasonable adjustments when dealing with underperformance or unsatisfactory performance. Staff moving to a new role may require a fitness-for-post assessment, depending on the duties of their new post.

Mr Storey: Given the concerns in many parts of the public sector about mental health, will the Minister ensure that the issue is given priority?

The Minister mentioned reasonable adjustment: will that be centred on the needs of the individual rather than the needs of the organisation?

Mr Murphy: The Civil Service recognises that it has a duty of care to all its employees. Where a member of staff raises an issue with their manager about mental health or a manager notices an issue that may be related to mental health, the Civil Service policy and procedures are clear. Referral to the occupational health service, welfare or other support services such as Inspire Workplaces, the charity for civil servants, or the mediation service should be offered as appropriate. In cases where mental health issues constitute a disability, line managers consider reasonable adjustments. I agree with the Member that, given that there is a growing focus on mental health issues, the Civil Service, as a responsible employer, needs to ensure that it has all appropriate support in place.

Mr O'Toole: I pay tribute to the hard work done by civil servants in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

I want to ask about the age profile of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. In 2018, just 0.5% of the Northern Ireland Civil Service was under the age of 25. We face a crisis in the age profile of our Civil Service. Will the Minister urgently prioritise lowering the age profile of the Civil Service, not because they are not hard-working but in order to deal with the challenges that face us, not least Brexit but also the climate emergency and a variety of other things? We need to have a younger age profile in our Civil Service.

Mr Murphy: It is certainly desirable for the Civil Service to have a balance in the gender and age profile of its workforce. The Member has to take into account the impact of nine years of austerity and the ability to recruit additional people, which may have slowed staff turnover and the recruitment of younger members. Of course, that is something we would like to see, but we cannot just push people out the other end to create a more balanced age profile in the workforce. Nonetheless, I hope that, if the situation improves, we will continue to recruit into the Civil Service and that there is a drive to ensure that the workforce reflects the age balance of the population generally.

Mr Lynch: Will the Minister give an update on the review of the Civil Service provided in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that there are a number of areas of work as a consequence of that. I brought a paper to the Executive on the issue of special advisers. A paper has been drafted and sent to the Executive on improvements to the ministerial code. All of that is work that flows from the workshops that took place last summer among the five parties that are entitled to be in the Executive. The Civil Service code is being developed. As with all of these codes and for the development of greater transparency, accountability and scrutiny, we will want to take account of what this Friday's report recommends and make sure that that is factored in to any development.

NDNA: Finances

3. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with Her Majesty's Government in relation to finances for New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 326/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have had a number of meetings with the Treasury over the last few weeks, including as recently as this morning. I had made the previous Chief Secretary to the Treasury — the now Chancellor, Rishi Sunak — aware that the costs of delivering the priorities set out in 'New Decade, New Approach' far outweigh the funding package set out by the British Government. This conversation has continued with the new Chief Secretary to the Treasury. I also continue to seek the reinstatement of the outstanding £240 million of confidence and supply funding.

Mr Clarke: Given that we have heard you cite so many times the pressures on budgets, how will you, as Finance Minister, decide what in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document takes priority and what just drops off?

Mr Murphy: It will be for the Executive to decide the priorities. I am sure that the Member is aware that the commitments given in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document were not part of a wish list that the parties just threw into the mix. They were carefully worked through by all the parties, senior civil servants from the Northern Ireland Office and senior civil servants from the Departments here, including the head of the Civil Service. Those approaches focused primarily on reform in health, education and justice and on trying to ensure that we had adequate support to take forward those programmes. This was not just grasped out of the air. The Executive agreed those priorities.

I have not given up trying to secure the funding, and I will continue to engage with the British Treasury on that. However, if we continue to fall short, the priorities that attach to the available funding package will be decided by the Executive as a whole.

Mr O'Dowd: In response to Mr Clarke's question, the Minister referred to the £240 million outstanding from the confidence and supply deal. Can the Minister tell the House whether that money has been withdrawn by the British Government?

Mr Murphy: A previous British Secretary of State reported verbally that the money no longer existed, even though there had been agreement with his Government to reprofile some of it, particularly for broadband funding. An element of it relates to mental health issues, another to deprivation. Those are key projects that would attract widespread support across the House. We had that verbal report. We have not managed to have it confirmed by the Treasury. The NIO has been singularly unhelpful in trying to ensure that we secure the money or, indeed, the money that it committed to in 'New Decade, New Approach'. Nonetheless, we continue to pursue that case with the Treasury.

Mr Allister: Have the Minister's officials costed everything that is in 'New Decade, New Approach'? If so, what is that total figure? Does the extra money still stand at only £760 million?

Mr Murphy: The Secretary of State outlined that what he declared in the package was £2 billion. As the Member will know, £1 billion of that is Barnett consequentials that would have come to us anyway. Of the other £1 billion that was declared to be new money, about £240,000 would have to compensate for the money removed from confidence and supply. That leaves about £750 million. The work undertaken in Departments identified resource DEL costs relating to New Decade, New Approach in 2020-21 amounting to £1.2 billion resource and £0.6 billion capital. Departments have estimated the total cost of time-bound interventions to be £1.5 billion resource and £7.5 billion capital, with the annual cost of continued intervention estimated at £1.2 billion resource and £0.3 billion capital DEL. Clearly, that is significantly above the financial package set out by the previous Secretary of State.

Mr Blair: Is the Minister seeking the additional funding from Treasury on the basis of a package of agreed reforms?

3.00 pm

Mr Murphy: As I said, at the end of the negotiations to re-establish these institutions, all the parties were very clear, as were the senior civil servants we talked to, about the money that was required and the purpose of it. The core purpose was for reform. We had that costed, and we presented it to the Treasury in relation to the commitments that the British Government made at that time and that they have not lived up to since.

Mr McGlone: Following the UK Budget this coming Wednesday, when will the Minister have an opportunity to update the Assembly on its consequences?

Mr Murphy: As I said in response to earlier questions, I had a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury this morning in London, along with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. A range of issues were put to him. There will be contact between me and the Treasury tomorrow when the Budget is announced to get a sense of what consequences might flow from it to us. As the Member will know, we delayed the Budget until we were sure of what may emerge from tomorrow's Budget in Britain. I will then bring propositions around that to the Executive to try to agree a Budget. The intention is to bring that back to the House for debate and approval on 30 March.

Landbanking

4. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Finance what plans he has to address landbanking. (AQO 327/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My understanding of landbanking is that it is the practice of a speculator acquiring land and then holding onto it without taking any action to develop it or make use of it. I am sure that many Members will be aware of that practice acting as a blockage to much-needed development in their constituency. The reasons for developers acquiring and holding land are varied. It is important to point out that site assembly is an important and legitimate part of the development process; for example, social housing providers assemble land for new housing development. I do not wish to do anything that would discourage the assembly of sites for socially beneficial development. However, there are cases of landbanking that do not deliver any benefits, such as when a developer buys land simply to speculate on capital gains and does not have any genuine intention of bringing forward a development. I

want to look at the options available to address damaging forms of landbanking and encourage development to be brought forward quickly.

Mr Stalford: I am very grateful to the Minister for his answer because it addresses precisely the concern that I have, particularly for inner-city areas of Belfast, where there is a dire need for increased social housing building but where we have a situation of private developers engaging in exactly the sort of practice that the Minister outlined. Has the Department considered, or is it in the process of considering, some sort of levy on holding land like that in order to encourage private developers to release it for public use?

Mr Murphy: I am aware, as the Member outlined, of one site in the Donegall Pass area that has been acquired by a nominated housing association with funding provided through the Executive Office's Urban Villages initiative. The transfer is anticipated to be completed this year.

On the broader question, of course, there is genuine acquiring and pooling of land for intended development. There is also an issue that very largely affects urban areas, particularly inner-city areas, where land is speculated on, acquired and sat on in order to see the conditions of the market.

There are a couple of ways that this can be approached. One is through the rating review of that land and what rates are applied to it and, indeed, to derelict properties and sites. As I said in answer to a previous question, if we were to acquire additional fiscal powers, would there be an opportunity to put a tax on properties such as that, which, clearly, are not intended for any immediate use or development? There are a couple of ways to approach this, and I intend to consider them in the time ahead to see which is the most appropriate.

Mr McAleer: The Minister partially answered my question. Has he given active consideration to introducing a derelict land tax that would perhaps discourage speculative landbanking?

Mr Murphy: As I said in a previous answer, we need to be certain that that is actually what is happening. We have a need for social housing and a need to ensure development, particularly in our urban areas, for housing, and we need to make sure that land is not sat on and does not become a blight to the communities in which it is located. Of course, derelict land tax may be one option. We have to bring forward a fiscal commission to look at the additional revenue-

raising powers that the Executive might have. As I said, the other way to address it may be as part of the broader rates review to see how that land can be brought in under that.

Reval2020: Hospitality Sector

5. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will put in place mitigation measures to assist businesses in the hospitality sector facing potential closure as a result of Reval2020. (AQO 328/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The hospitality sector is very important to the economy here, and we as an Executive want to do all that we can to support it. However, it needs to be recognised that it pays 3% of all business rates and that 60% of pubs currently benefit from rate relief through the small business rate relief scheme.

I will consider the options for all relief provisions for 2020-21 and beyond in the context of the business rates consultation and the wider Budget issues that face us as an Executive. If they have not already done so, I encourage hospitality proprietors who are unhappy with the proposed revaluation assessment to raise the matter with Land and Property Services in my Department.

Ms Bunting: I thank the Minister for his answer, although I am still not clear as to whether his Department has given consideration to mitigation measures. If it has done so, I would be grateful if he would outline what those mitigation measures are and indicate whether he is willing to meet representatives from the sector to address the problem directly.

Mr Murphy: As I said, 60% of pubs benefit from the small business rate relief scheme already. I have met representatives from the hospitality sector — from hotels and pubs — and I think that I have an arrangement to meet them again in the near future to discuss the issues.

Not a bill has been issued yet, so there are opportunities for people who are unhappy with the revaluation exercise and consider the assessment to be too high to challenge it by providing additional information on the premises' turnover. I know that that has happened on a number of occasions, with the effect being that there was a change in the assessment. I therefore encourage people to do that in the first instance. There is a fairly tight time frame for rates this year, but, beyond this year, we will be into a full-scale review of the entire rating system.

Mr McNulty: Last night, the SDLP brought a motion to Belfast City Council that called for support to be provided to businesses that may face challenges as a result of coronavirus. The Irish Government have provided €200 million in liquidity funds to support businesses that face such challenges. Is the Minister considering putting in place mitigation measures to assist businesses in the hospitality sector, and businesses in general, that may face closure as a result of coronavirus?

Mr Murphy: I listened to some of the questions to the Education Minister, so the response to that is clearly unfolding. There is increasing concern, and rightly so, not only about the impact on our health service and healthcare system, and on people's health generally, but about the economic damage.

Along with the Scottish and the Welsh Finance Ministers, I had a discussion this morning with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about ensuring that there is an appropriate level of support from the Treasury to deal with whatever difficulties we may face as a consequence of this. I intend to continue that conversation with him to ensure, as this unfolds — none of us, as yet, knows what the full impact may be — that we can continue to access levels of support. The Executive have the ability to access some resource, but we want to ensure that, if the Treasury steps up its approach, we get the associated support.

Ms Rogan: The Minister answered my question about the small business rate relief scheme in his previous answer.

Ms Armstrong: The revaluation occurred on 1 April 2018, but there are pubs and hotels that have seen significant changes since then. If they submit evidence of the impact of those changes to their business after 1 April 2018, will that be taken into consideration in a revaluation?

Mr Murphy: I know from speaking to officials in the Department that they are encouraging people to submit evidence right up to that point. I therefore presume from that that any evidence, right up to the point that it is submitted, is valid.

Of course, we are conscious, as I said in my previous answer, that if there is an economic impact from coronavirus, that will probably be felt primarily in the hospitality sector, because we may see a restriction on travel and tourism. Of course we want to look at what support we can provide. As I said in response to the initial

question, we encourage people who consider the revaluation exercise to be damaging to them to submit additional information. I am aware that, where that has already been done, it has resulted in a change in the assessment.

Derry and Strabane City Deal

6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance, in light of his support for, and recent comments concerning, the Derry and Strabane city deal, what assurances he can give that any money spent on a new medical school will be based on a business case. (AQO 329/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The 'New Decade, New Approach' document identified support for city deal packages and for the expansion of Magee, including a graduate entry medical school, as priorities for an incoming Executive.

Of course, all expenditure requires approval, which usually takes the form of a business case. Ulster University is developing a business case for the medical school at Magee. On completion, the business case must be formally submitted to a Department for expenditure appraisal. It is for the responsible accounting officer to provide the necessary assurances to the Department of Finance, usually through the business case process, that the project represents value for money, is affordable and meets the requirements in respect of propriety and regularity.

Mr M Bradley: It is important to remember that Magee is a campus of Ulster University, and I ask that its sister campus at Coleraine be included as the project is vital to the regeneration of the whole north-west region, including Coleraine and Limavady. In collaboration, we can achieve much more than we can in isolation.

Mr Murphy: I congratulate the Member for getting his constituency interest in. The business case is for a graduate entry medical school at Magee. I have no doubt that any investment in the north-west, including in Coleraine, benefits the entire north-west. There is a commitment from the Executive, which is matched by a commitment from the British Government, and the Irish Government have indicated that they also support the development of Magee. We want to see that. I have no doubt that a successful business case and a successful development and expansion of Magee will be of benefit to the much broader north-west region, including Coleraine.

Ms Mullan: I welcome the Minister's ongoing commitment to Derry. Does he intend to provide financial support for the north-west city deal and the Inclusive Future Fund, in line with the commitments in New Decade, New Approach?

Mr Murphy: As part of the New Decade, New Approach financial package, as I said, the Government in Britain committed to providing £45 million of capital funding through the Inclusive Future Fund. The Executive can choose to contribute through their own funds, and, as I said, the Irish Government have expressed a commitment to exploring opportunities for investment to bring greater economic prosperity.

The financial package also provided an additional £15 million of resource funding to meet some of the recurrent costs of the project. At this time, the period over which the resource funding is available is not clear. Of course, we have to bring a paper to the Executive on support for the city deal and the Inclusive Future Fund. I intend to do that in the near future, and my support for the project is well on the record.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the fact that the paper will be brought to the Executive soon; it was always anticipated that the Executive would need to match fund what was announced by the UK Government last May. Will the Minister give a commitment that he will work with Executive colleagues collaboratively to help to address the economic and infrastructural deficit in the north-west?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I certainly can give that commitment. I had the opportunity to visit Derry last week, and I met council representatives, people from the Chamber of Commerce, people in the Museum of Free Derry and representatives of some of the local social enterprise and community projects. A wide range of interventions will be required in Derry to assist it in growing economically and in being, as its potential allows it to be, the centre of economic development in the north-west region.

I also had an opportunity to engage with the vice chancellor of Ulster University when I was in Derry and to discuss the centrality of the Magee project to all of that development. That was a consistent message from everybody whom I met in Derry. Of course, there is a range of interventions, and I am more than happy to talk to Executive colleagues about what assistance they can provide, because it is not simply a matter of one Department going up

and doing one thing; a broad Executive approach is required to support the north-west.

Barnett Consequentials: Infrastructure

7. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Finance what representations he has made to the Treasury in relation to Barnett consequentials resulting from infrastructure spend in the forthcoming Westminster Budget. (AQO 330/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have just returned from a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and my Scottish and Welsh counterparts this morning, where the Budget was discussed.

The Member might be aware that Barnett consequentials are received when new funding is announced by the British Government. That is an established process so there is no need to make representations on the specifics of Barnett consequentials to the Treasury. Obviously, we will be watching with interest tomorrow to see what announcements are in the Budget and working to assess the consequences for our own Budget.

The Member, being a member of the Finance Committee, will be aware that we took a decision to delay our own Budget beyond tomorrow to see what the consequentials may be.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: Pat Catney for a supplementary; there is one minute left.

Mr Catney: Minister, you are working on your Budget and trying to finalise it. We keep hearing about the shortfall in money that we have at the moment. Will that be bridged going forward?

Mr Murphy: It is up to the Executive to decide what to do. Barnett consequentials do not come ring-fenced. The signals from the British Treasury are that there will be quite a substantial increase in spend on infrastructure. Obviously, that comes as capital and would have to be spent on capital projects. Every Department has capital ambitions in some of the bids that they have submitted to the Department of Finance. It will be up to the Executive to decide, in line with their priorities, how to spend that money as it arrives.

Mr Speaker: We will now move on to topical questions.

COVID-19: Available Finance

T1. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance, in the light of yesterday's COVID-19 statement from the Minister of Health, whether finance will be available to the Department of Finance and the Department of Education in the event that Northern Ireland needs to move from containment to the sustained transmission stage. (AQT 231/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I said, I discussed the issue this morning with the Treasury and with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. We collectively made the case. The Executive will receive a share of any additional funding provided by the Treasury in response to the coronavirus. However, it will be possible to make representations for further funding, should that be necessary. The Executive are also able to access the reserve, in the same way as Whitehall Departments and the other devolved Administrations can, for any exceptional and unforeseen circumstances that cannot be easily absorbed without a major dislocation of existing services.

As I said in response to other questions, this is an unfolding situation, and the experience in other countries rightly leads us to be increasingly concerned about the impact on public health, the strain on the health service and the effect on other public services and the economy generally. We have had that discussion. As money is made available by London to deal with that, we should have our share of it. If we have additional issues above and beyond that, we have the right to go and make the case for that.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for his response. I am an optimist by nature and am hopeful that that situation will not arise, but it is vital to have forward planning in place in case it does.

Mr Murphy: As the Education Minister said, we had advice from the Chief Medical Officer at the last Executive meeting. The Health Minister is updating us regularly on the latest medical advice, and that continues to inform where we are. As you can see in the South and in Britain, that advice is continuing to evolve over time. We have to be very conscious of that and very conscious of the public alarm in relation to what is developing, and we have to make sure that we are equipped to deal with all that as best we can but based on sound medical advice.

Translink: Meeting

T2. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister of Finance, given that the chief executive of Translink said last week that he had written to him to seek a meeting about the organisation's funding, whether that meeting has taken place. (AQT 232/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No, it has not. As part of my budgetary discussions, I met the Minister for Infrastructure, and she updated me on the entirety of the pressures in her Department, including in Translink, which is a component part of her Department. As part of those preparations, I met all Ministers to discuss the financial pressures in their Departments. It will then be for the Executive as a whole to agree the departmental allocations as part of the Budget, and it is my preference that the financial pressures that all Departments are subject to are discussed and addressed in a collegiate and collective way. I have not undertaken the practice of meeting component parts of any Department. It is up to the Minister responsible for that to make the case for her area.

Dr Archibald: Minister, you said that you have discussed the financial pressures with the various Departments. Could you outline the scale of the collective financial pressure facing the Executive?

Mr Murphy: Assessment of all the inescapable pressures that have been presented by all Departments shows that there is a shortfall of £600 million. That is before the commitments under New Decade, New Approach, which have yet to be accepted and delivered upon by the British Government, are factored in.

New Decade, New Approach: PSNI Officers

T4. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Finance, given that he referred to the fact that he met with Treasury officials earlier today and that we hear a lot from Members about their commitment to Patten, albeit that it referred to peace times and we have those who remain prepared to murder on our streets, what conversations he has had with Treasury about the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increase the number of PSNI officers to 7,500. (AQT 234/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The job that I have been tasked with by the Executive is to go and secure the commitments that were made by the British Government as part of New Decade, New Approach. That is what I have tried to do. That

is across a whole range of pressures. As I said, those proposals were carefully worked through and were encouraged to be brought forward by the NIO at the time, with a very strong indication that they would be delivered upon if agreement were possible. All parties acted on that in good faith. In our sense, we have lived up to the political commitments that we made with regard to New Decade, New Approach. If we were to have the same blasé approach to living up to commitments as the British Government do, we would not be sitting here in this institution, discussing these matters. Parties lived up to their commitments: it is up to the Government to live up to their own commitments. Those are across a range of areas, as I indicated earlier; health transformation, education transformation, and also justice transformation. There is a specific reference to an additional 700 police officers, I think. Of course, I am trying to secure the commitments that were made so that we can deliver across all those areas.

Mr Storey: The Minister will be aware that, today, the Audit Office referred to an additional pressure of £500 million for injury-on-duty payments in relation to pensions. That comes on the back of the Scofield report, which was in the hands of the then Justice Minister, David Ford. Unfortunately, it seems as though its recommendations have not been enacted in the way that they should have been. Therefore, there is still a pressure of £500 million. When all that is put together with the existing pressures that are faced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, how does the Minister see the Executive prioritising that, given the fact that the 'New Decade, New Approach' document actually states that we "will" — it is not aspirational or less than woolly, as some other parts of the document are — increase the number to 7,500?

Mr Murphy: I remind the Member, although I probably do not need to, that the document was written by both Governments. It was not written by the political parties of the Executive; it was written by both Governments. So the we "will" was a commitment from both Governments, and, primarily, in the case of the additional police personnel, a commitment from the British Government. That is why it is important that they live up to those commitments. It is not acceptable for five parties and two Governments to come to an agreement, and one Government to decide that they do not need to honour the commitments that they made in it.

Housing Executive

T5. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance for an update in the future funding of the Housing Executive, given that, during yesterday's Question Time with the Minister for Communities, the future of the Housing Executive was discussed, with the Minister mentioning that she has had conversations with him, the fact that he has mentioned conversations with Treasury and the fact that we know how important it is that the Housing Executive be able to borrow going forward, especially with the debt that it is in. (AQT 235/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It has been an ambition to get the Housing Executive back to a position where it could build houses again, to ensure that best use is made of the housing resource and in order to raise more capital. That has been brought into acute relief over the past year by the inability to access financial transactions capital, which had to be surrendered back to the Treasury. I am working closely with the Minister for Communities. She has indicated that she wants to bring forward propositions to deal with that, so that the Housing Executive is in a position to access that capital. I have undertaken to do all in my Department's power to support and assist her in doing that, because it is important, not only for those who are on the housing list and in dire need of housing, but for the economy generally, that we are able to access that and start to stimulate economic growth as well as build houses for those in need.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Minister, you talk about the Department for Communities, but you have a strong part to play in moving this forward. So many people are in housing need and housing stress in all constituencies. This issue needs to be addressed as a priority. Will you give that commitment?

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member, and that is why the Minister for Communities and I have set up a joint working arrangement between the two of us and between senior people in the two Departments to make sure that, whatever processes are needed to be moved forward, there is no disconnect between the Departments. We have a shared ambition, which, I think, is shared across the Executive, to make sure that we provide housing to those most in need and that we use that to stimulate economic growth. There is a firm commitment from the Minister for Communities and me to work together on these issues.

Corporation Tax Loopholes

T6. Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance to detail the discussions he has initiated, if any, with his counterparts in Westminster about closing corporation tax loopholes that allow for evasion and avoidance to the tune of billions of pounds every year. (AQT 236/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I said to the Member in response to a previous question, I have not initiated any action on corporation tax. The power was not devolved. The circumstances, I believe, do not merit that it be devolved in this instance. If people are using company law and various taxation loopholes to evade the making of proper contributions from their business, that would be a crossover issue between the Economy Department and the Finance Department. If the Member has evidence that he wishes to bring forward, I would certainly be happy to take it up with Treasury officials.

Mr Carroll: The Minister will probably be aware of tax evasion and avoidance to the tune of at least tens of billions of pounds every year. Does he agree that closing the loophole and tackling tax evasion and avoidance would, potentially, allow more money to be invested in our public services?

Mr Murphy: It would. However, tax is paid primarily to the British Treasury. Therefore, if the loopholes allowing avoidance were closed, any money secured would go to the Treasury. On the basis that it would have more money to distribute, we might get a proportion of that.

Of course, people are accused of benefit fraud and other things that are at the lower end of the scale. I hope that those involved in tax evasion will be pursued with similar enthusiasm and that the money is returned so that it can be distributed across public services. I share that ambition, but, unfortunately, it is not a responsibility of this institution, it is London's responsibility.

Destined: Arson Attack

T7. Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance, after thanking him for his visit last week to Derry, whether he can provide Destined, an organisation that he met with that helps vulnerable adults, with some advice as to how it can get a temporary kitchen while it waits for repairs to take place following an appalling arson attack. (AQT 237/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I was delighted to get the opportunity to visit that organisation. I am a great admirer of a range of social enterprise projects, particularly those that help very

vulnerable people, as the Destined project does. You could not help but be inspired by visiting that project, talking to people and seeing their determination to overcome the setback caused by that thoughtless and cruel attack on the building. The response of the community in providing support to that project shows its value. I raised the issue with officials when I got back to the Department to try to ensure that, if it were possible to give any assistance to a project that provides such a valuable community service, they would do so. I know that they intended to speak to people in the Department for Communities to ensure that assistance is provided.

Ms Anderson: Minister, can that information be relayed to Destined so that it has a contact point in your office and in the Department for Communities?

Mr Murphy: I am sure that we can do that. As I said, I asked my officials to speak to people in the Department for Communities to ensure that they reach out to Destined. It provides a valuable community service and was the unfortunate victim of a criminal attack. We want to ensure that it continues to provide support. We will, of course, be in contact.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: I call Roy Beggs. I advise the Member that there is no time for a supplementary question.

Budget Process

T8. Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance when a new Budget process will be introduced that will be much more encompassing, will include the public in a more substantial way and will provide for healthier politics. (AQT 238/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member reminded me in an earlier debate, that suggestion was brought forward by the Finance Committee when I was the Chair. The initiative involved getting a much more transparent, and I do not mean on things that are hidden, more understandable and accessible Budget process so that members of the public as well as Members of this institution can engage with it.

I will undertake to talk to officials in the Department to see where those propositions landed and how they have been dealt with over time. It is in our interests to get to a much more manageable process, because, in the last

couple of weeks, we ended up having a Budget debate, in effect, on an issue that was about retrospective spend. It was not about future spend at all, but many people, particularly in the Chamber, got a false impression about how the Budget process actually works and what we were debating at that particular time.

I think that it is in all our interests to get a much more accessible, understandable, clear process going forward, and I will engage with officials in the Finance Department to see how that can be done.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for one moment.

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

Private Members' Business

Childcare Strategy

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly believes that access to good quality and affordable childcare can help empower those parents who want to stay and progress in paid work; accepts that this, in turn, will contribute to the local economy; recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child; supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; further recognises that there are significant pressures already on the budget of the Department of Education; and calls upon the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable this to proceed. — [Mr Newton.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all between "help" and "accepts" and insert:

"tackle disadvantage and poverty by closing the educational gap between the most and least advantaged children, can empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work, and those who want to return to education or training;" — [Ms C Kelly.]

Ms McLaughlin: The SDLP has consistently called for affordable childcare. We very clearly prioritised the issue and were instrumental in ensuring that it was placed in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. Therefore, I welcome this opportunity to build much-needed momentum on the issue, and we will support the amendment.

The proposed measures are long overdue. Their implementation would bring long-reaching economic and social benefits, enabling parents to balance their careers with family commitments more easily and helping to alleviate the financial burdens that are often placed on new parents. We already know that women are disproportionately affected by the lack of affordable childcare, especially those on low incomes. That is an issue of inequality.

Entrenched societal norms mean that childcare duties still largely fall to women. Consequently, many are forced to make decisions regarding whether to enter or return to work and whether

to work full or part-time, as well as trying to predict the impact that those decisions will have on their career progression. That is on top of all the other challenges that motherhood brings.

For many women, working is not financially viable except to allow them to retain skills and their foothold in the labour market. It is appalling that they should be forced into financial hardship as a result of their desire to maintain and grow their skill set. A skilled workforce is vital to the growth of a strong and balanced local economy. Additionally, increasing investment in childcare provision will lead to much-needed job creation. Many women take on part-time work in an attempt to balance competing commitments. NISRA statistics released in December 2018 show that 82% of part-time employees in Northern Ireland are female. That has a knock-on effect, increasing the gender pay gap and threatening women's long-term economic security. Also, many part-time workers report being overlooked for promotion, which stalls career advancement.

The same report found that a third of working-age women are not in the labour force, compared with 23% of men, and the most cited reason was that they were looking after the family and the home.

In contrast, that was the lowest-ranked reason for economic inactivity among males. Moreover, female economic inactivity rates are highest for mothers whose youngest child is of preschool age. That exposes the harsh reality that the cost of childcare forces women in Northern Ireland out of the workplace. The provision of free childcare would dismantle barriers preventing women's full and equal access to the labour market and increase economic participation, which, in turn, would increase family income. Following a pilot of 30 hours of free childcare in four local authorities in England in 2017, research carried out by Frontier Economics found that the vast majority of parents reported improved finances. That created more disposable income that could be put towards a wide range of activities that supported the social and emotional well-being of the child: anything from creative hobbies through to visiting museums and spending more time on education and in youth clubs.

Crucially, the proposed free childcare provision must be geographically accessible and sufficiently flexible. Anything less would not be truly transformative. Rural communities would be hit particularly hard, and, as we know, they already face many other economic and social disadvantages. The SDLP supports the motion and the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I remind Members that the debate is scheduled to end at 4.30 pm. I have 15 names on my list of Members who wish to speak. In the spirit of being generous across the Chamber, I encourage all Members to be generous and not use up their full time allocation. In that way, more Members will be able to speak.

Mr Butler: I will try to speak faster, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker; usually, I try to slow down. I am now filling the time with nonsense.

I support the motion. The availability of quality childcare not only prepares children for the best start in life through early years development but enables parents of young children to play a full role in the workforce, promoting prosperity and economic opportunity. Furthermore, it encourages a more equal workforce by affording parents a greater opportunity to work full-time.

For many people, the duality of being a working parent can often limit their full potential in the workplace. The return to work after any maternity or paternity period is often phased as a result of childcare needs, and that can leave people at a disadvantage in the workplace. It is a particular concern for working women, owing to a greater impact on their career from maternity breaks. Having recently celebrated International Women's Day, I believe that the Assembly should support the motion on that point alone. Many women pause or abandon their career ambitions because of parental obligations, and any scheme that encourages them to maximise their potential should be supported.

As a parent and occasional foster parent, I understand the obligations of parenthood and its challenges and complexities. I have witnessed how early years development of children is vital to giving them the best start and increased opportunities in life. I recognise and note that responsive and interactive environments are also necessary for early years development and that quality childcare environments are designed to help a child's development through communication and social engagement and through encouraging young children to express themselves and understand their surroundings. That being the case, while the majority of responsibility lies with parents, there is a responsibility on employers to create family-friendly work environments. At one stage, my former employer, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, launched a new, family-friendly shift pattern. The establishment of a model that maintained emergency response resilience and a shift

pattern that saw the full-time cohort of which I was part working from 11.00 am to 11.00 pm enabled me to prepare breakfast and take my two young children to school every day. They were both at school at the time. That valuable move enabled my wife to return to work as a nurse and to support her team in the care setting, and it benefited me by allowing me to spend more time with my kids. Therefore, in many cases, the full 30 hours of childcare may not be required to facilitate parents playing a full role in the workplace. Increased flexibility from employers might have a desirable effect in that regard. The availability of childcare voucher schemes should also be promoted in the workplace to assist parents.

I appreciate that there will be a cost associated with any implementation of the proposal, especially at this time of budget tightening, and it is our duty as custodians and stewards of public money to ensure that it is spent in the most cost-effective manner. I welcome the calls for the implementation of a full childcare strategy across Northern Ireland, a strategy that ensures, in the first instance, that childcare is available to everyone who needs it across every region of Northern Ireland and delivers high-quality childcare. The strategy should also support our children's early years development, encourage a more diverse workplace and promote the opportunities of economic freedom and prosperity for all of Northern Ireland's hard-working parents.

Mr Robinson: The debate is about an essential way in which parents can continue to get access to the workplace, including promotion opportunities. It is, therefore, an essential part of workforce and personal development. For many parents, especially mothers, childcare is the only way in which they can continue to work or to seek employment. Those parents have gained their education and must be aided to use it to the maximum. I have stated in previous debates that I want everyone to reach their maximum educational attainment. However, there should be ways to ensure that their ability to use their education are maximised.

One way to ensure that is for affordable childcare to be made available to help them to obtain employment. Good childcare is beneficial not only to parents but to the child. Good socialisation aids the child in social interactions. Childcare also ensures a level of movement that helps children with their physical development and benefits their overall educational achievement.

All this can be achieved via childcare, as well as giving parents the opportunity to return to

work or education and seek promotion in their current employment. It also helps in lowering levels of child poverty and in increasing economic activity. There is a lot to be gained from a childcare scheme.

In New Decade, New Approach, there is a commitment to affordable childcare, which I want to be brought to fruition. In a written answer to our DUP colleague Ms Bradley, the Education Minister stated that he would be:

"developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable"

childcare.

I welcome the Minister's commitment to a childcare strategy and will support him fully in all his efforts. Members, I stress again how much can be achieved from a childcare strategy for children, parents and the economy in general in Northern Ireland.

I urge the Executive and all Members to support the motion tabled by my DUP colleagues for the benefit of all in Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr Lyttle: Equal access to affordable early education and childcare is absolutely essential for the vital stages of early childhood development; the support of all families, including those living with disabilities; and to help parents and guardians, particularly women, to access training and employment. Despite this, consecutive Northern Ireland Executive Ministers — initially the Health Minister, then the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, most recently, the Education Minister — have yet to produce a fully costed childcare strategy.

Thankfully — however belatedly — the penny appears to have well and truly dropped with regard to the significance of childcare costs and provision to families across Northern Ireland, and that is to be welcomed. The significance of that cost cannot be overestimated and, as Members across the House said today, the cost can be over £150 per week for many families and up to 40% of weekly household income.

We have organisations like Employers For Childcare, the Early Years organisation, the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA), PlayBoard NI, trade unions and all the organisations involved in the Childcare For All campaign, including private providers, to thank for this work and the realisation that the Executive and Assembly must make childcare access a priority.

I welcome the fact that childcare is now a priority for the Executive. That was demonstrated by the time that Executive parties dedicated to considering detailed options for a new model of childcare for Northern Ireland as part of the Programme for Government working group strand of the recent talks, and by the establishment of the all-party working group on early education and childcare, of which I am privileged to act as co-chair.

Access to affordable childcare is a long-standing priority for the Alliance Party, and we will, therefore, support the motion. However, I will be clear: the detail of this provision needs urgent and further work, including co-production and co-design with everyone involved with the all-party working group on early education and childcare, without prejudice to the number of hours and weeks, the days in which those hours can be taken, the quality, affordability, flexibility and eligibility, the setting and duration, which will meet the appropriate needs of families in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

Mr Middleton: Those of us who have been blessed with a child know that they bring unbelievable joy to our lives. There is no greater honour for me than being a parent. My son is two and a half years old, and every day is a learning day. My wife, Julie, and I continue to work full-time, trying to do our best to raise David in the best possible way.

For many parents, there are challenges when it comes to finances, whether that is returning to work or, of course, access to childcare. Many parents have to weigh the cost of childcare against the income that they receive on returning to work. Some of us rely heavily on grandparents and relatives to provide support to help us as parents to return to work so that we can provide for the family. It is vital that, as an Assembly, we do all we can to empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work.

There should be no doubt around the transformative role that good childcare provides in supporting the educational, social and physical development of our children. I fully support the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three-to-four-year-olds. I also recognise, however, that childcare is not an issue for just three-to-four-year-olds; we know that many parents struggle most when their children are in the zero-to-two age bracket, especially where mums are trying to get back into work. Evidence shows that the

first 1,000 days are the most important for child development.

I welcome the commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' regarding the childcare strategy and its commitment to:

"give immediate priority to developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive, high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families".

We need the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable that to proceed as soon as possible.

I thank Employers For Childcare for sharing their research and the useful comparative information that they provided. My colleague Robin Newton alluded to some of the differences across the jurisdictions. Those comparisons are useful in trying to draw up a solution that is unique to Northern Ireland.

All of our children deserve the best start in life. Childcare services should be available to all children, regardless of where they live, their needs or their circumstances. Childcare should be affordable and sustainable and no longer take a disproportionate share of average household incomes. The economic benefits of free childcare in supporting parents back into work are self-evident, but we have to ensure that the balance of family life and work is right. We have many outstanding childcare facilities in our constituencies, and it is important that, in the short term, we do all that we can to ensure that facilities that struggle financially or face closure get the support that they need. I support the motion.

Ms Dolan:

"In today's economy, when having both parents in the work force is an economic necessity for many families, we need affordable, high-quality child care more than ever. It's not a nice-to-have; it's a must-have. So it's time we stop treating child care as a side issue, or a women's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us."

Those were the words of President Obama in his State of the Union address at the start of 2015. His words are also applicable to our society today, especially for those of us who live in rural communities.

I am only too aware of the benefits that good, affordable and reliable childcare brings to rural communities. It is no less important to rural

parents and children than it is to those in urban areas. Childcare has an important role to play in helping to sustain rural communities. Parents need access to childcare so that they can make the most of the opportunities for employment, training or helping to support voluntary or community activities. Employers need childcare so that they can attract and retain a skilled and committed workforce. Children need facilities that help them to develop and integrate in a pleasant and safe environment. Childcare provision has positive effects on all of society. The provision of first-class childcare helps parents into work and helps move families out of poverty, while helping break the cycle of intergenerational deprivation.

Access to high-quality childcare and early education not only promotes a child's development but gives much-needed support to parents who struggle to balance work and family obligations. A safe, nurturing environment that enriches children's development is critical to families and is one of the best investments that we can make in our economy. Parents who work in low-wage jobs face real difficulties in affording quality childcare. Without help, many families can face the untenable choice of not working or leaving their children in unsafe, unstable or poor-quality arrangements. Affordable, quality childcare can help parents so that they can go to work to support their family. Higher household spending on childcare means that workers here have less disposable income and are more likely to fall into in-work poverty as their wages are absorbed by childcare costs.

Speaking of wages, let me talk about childcare workers' pay. The childcare sector employs an estimated 10,000 paid workers in the North. Childcare workers are employed in a wide range of settings from private day nurseries to nursery nurses and preschool assistants. All workers should be paid the real living wage in order for them to have a decent standard of living, yet 48% of workers in the childcare sector are more likely to be paid below the real living wage, in comparison with 30% of workers in other sectors. What does that look like? The median hourly rate for childcare workers is £8.90, which is well below the median rate for workers in other sectors, which could be up to £11 an hour. In addition to that, the overall childcare workforce is overwhelmingly female — 99% — compared with other occupations, in which it is around 47%. Childcare workers are young relative to workers in other occupations, with an average age of 36 compared with 41 in other occupations.

Childcare provision is more than having your child minded. It has numerous additional benefits for the child, such as improved school readiness and combating social exclusion. The wages and conditions of childcare staff need to reflect that. Childcare workers need to have decent progression routes to be able to upskill in their field of work, and their progression needs to be rewarded with better wages. While I acknowledge that accessibility and affordability are two key issues, I conclude my remarks by stressing the need to recognise and reward the invaluable contribution that the childcare workforce makes in nurturing the generations coming behind us at one of the most crucial times of their lives. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr McNulty: I support the motion and thank the Members who brought the issue to the House. Childcare is one of the biggest burdens and overheads that face young families — working families in particular — across the region and across the island. By investing in childcare, we invest in children and their parents.

Like many other Members, I have heard stories from young families, many of whom have seen one parent give up work until their children are of school age, as the cost of childcare is just too much. Whilst cost is a deciding factor for many parents, we must think of the positives for children engaging from a young age with other children of the same vintage as themselves. The provision of funded childcare can and would give a boost to working families. It would help to bolster the economy and show the squeezed middle that this place listens and cares for them as well. Provision must be more than just a token gesture. It must be tangible and must be put on a statutory footing. It must be universal and accessible locally to parents. I also believe that a robust and meaningful consultation with the sector and with schools and parents would be helpful in shaping provision.

I cannot return to my seat without paying tribute to those who work in the childcare sector and, indeed, the many grandparents and extended family members who already step in to provide childcare where the state does not at present. Many parents tell me that, only for their extended — often retired — family members, they could not continue to work. I support the motion and the creation of a childcare strategy.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McCrossan does not appear to be in the Chamber. We have a feast of SDLP representatives. I call Mr Pat Catney.

Mr Catney: I will have a word with that fella McCrossan when I see him *[Laughter.]*

Mrs D Kelly: There will be more than you.

Mr Catney: Ah, the Chief Whip.

I welcome the motion, which recognises the vital role that childcare plays in child development and in empowering parents who want to get into work, remain in work and progress in work. I have heard many young women Members speaking here today. When the first man has a baby, it will be the end of the world. We could not cope. It just stretches everything that we have. I speak as the father of four children. I found it nearly impossible trying to juggle having children and being in a working environment. My wife was a civil servant. Rosemary had to give up her job to raise our four children. I do not want that to happen to others. I want to empower young men and women who have a family so that they are able to hold on to their career.

When we were at the talks to get Stormont up and going, this was a major ask. I welcome the motion that has come from across the Floor, but the SDLP tried everything and brought the issue to every stage of those talks. I was delighted to be there and part of that.

I want to be as quick as I can, but I want to highlight that, in Lisburn, we have an excellent social enterprise, Employers For Childcare, who do an excellent job. I welcome the recognition that access to good, affordable childcare is important to the local economy and what flows out of that when young parents are able to work. I agree that childcare plays a vital role in supporting children's development. We support the call for a childcare strategy and agree that it should be supported by legislation. We support the motion.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. I strongly agree with the tenor of his speech. Does the Member agree that a failure to invest in childcare, children and young adults means that we store up greater costs down the line?

Mr Catney: I agree with my fellow Member about those future problems. To add to that, we have taken the pension at 60 away from the women who were those childcarers. We now make them work until the age of 66. They were the carers in our society. They took up the slack and filled in. That was one reason why the SDLP pushed to have this included. Hopefully, the motion will pass and there will be a new legislative power.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker — thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You are grand. Thank you.

Ms Bailey: I support the motion, but it is with regret. The motion would provide only for three- and four-year-olds. I have to agree with Employers For Childcare — it contacted us all, I think — when they point out that childcare is not an issue only for three- and four-year-olds. Parents struggle most when their children are in the 0 to two age bracket, especially when mums are trying to get back into work. The first 1,000 days are the most important for child development. If we are serious about creating a childcare strategy, we need to focus on the lack of accessible, affordable and flexible childcare as one of the fundamental inequalities facing us. If we are to tackle that inequality, how we treat our youngest members of society, along with tackling inequality for working women, are two good places to start.

Universal child-centred childcare that meets the needs of children, families and childcare workers and providers benefits society. We have plenty of European examples of that to draw on.

4.00 pm

I note that the Minister of Education replied to a question on the childcare strategy by stating:

"The revised Strategy will take account of ... advances in childcare across other jurisdictions and the policy priorities for supporting families reaffirmed in 'New Decade, New Approach'. This includes developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive and high quality early education and care provision for families with children aged 3-4."

It is, therefore, no surprise that the motion has come from his party colleagues.

I suggest that we look at how the Danes, Swedes and Norwegians, for example, do childcare to see how beneficial it is to the labour market, to tackling child poverty and to building the emotional, physical and psychological well-being of our children. What we need in Northern Ireland is a childcare system that is affordable, accessible, high-quality and flexible and that supports children's education and development. Childcare should be available and suitable for all children of all ages, including those with disabilities and those living in rural locations.

Childcare provision should enable parents to access and stay in paid work, education and training. It is also essential that childcare work is recognised with decent pay and terms and conditions so that we can attract and retain the best workers to sustain and grow that industry. Childcare is not a luxury but a necessity for most parents, because most families require two wages to get by financially. Childcare is essential for single parents in order for them to hold down a job at the same time as caring for their family.

In 2018, I was delighted to host the launch of the Childcare For All campaign and the Children's Charter here at Stormont. That initiative was supported by some of the biggest children's charities and unions in Northern Ireland, including Save the Children, Barnardo's and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). In 2018, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation poverty report data showed that 370,000 people in Northern Ireland live in poverty. That figure consisted of 110,000 children, with over half of those children living in households where at least one parent was working. That means that almost one in four children here live in a family that struggles to provide their basic needs for a warm, adequate home, nutritious food and appropriate clothing in order to pay for childcare. Looking to the future, it is essential that the childcare infrastructure in Northern Ireland supports parents to access and stay in work or training and, once they are there, helps to ensure that that work pays for families and childcare workers and helps to lift us all out of poverty.

In Scandinavia, access to childcare for young children is considered a formal right, with restrictions on the maximum fee that parents have to pay set by government. As a result, in 2016 98% of children aged under three in Denmark were in nursery, with the majority of them spending more than 30 hours a week there. Families pay up to 25% of the cost of day care. Those on low incomes and single parents pay between nothing and 25% of the cost, and there are discounts for siblings — imagine. The Government make up the difference. Why is that the case? It is because the Scandinavians see childcare as a long-term investment in children, in families and in their economy. Those countries have embraced universal childcare as the right of every child and a responsibility of the state to provide. Nordic countries like Sweden and Denmark have some of the highest maternal employment rates in the world, as well as the lowest child poverty rates. Quality childcare is delivered —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Could the Member conclude her remarks?

Ms Bailey: — by a highly qualified, well-paid workforce. Unpaid childcare alone here is worth nearly £350 billion to the UK economy each year — three times more than the total value of the financial services sector — yet it is not counted towards GDP.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is now nearly 30 seconds over. Could you please resume your seat?

Ms Bailey: I seek a call from the House —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that I will have to cut the Member's mic, because she refuses to abide by rulings from the Chair.

Ms Bailey: — that we need to go much further than what the motion calls for if we are to get serious about childcare.

Mr Carroll: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak about such an important issue. The issues associated with childcare, from lack of access to cost, present a huge barrier in society for parents, predominantly women and particularly those in poverty or those who come from a minority background.

It is worth highlighting the fact that 91% of single parents with dependent children are mothers. Although women make up much more of the workforce than ever before, childcare remains a barrier for far too many. It is primarily women who work as childcare providers, as we have heard.

The theme is not isolated to childcare. Unpaid domestic work is carried out predominantly by women to the benefit of the state, which does not have to pay for it, whether that is caring for children, sick relatives or the elderly. It is very important that we treat the issue as not simply an educational or economic one but a gendered one. That means ensuring that we do not add to the systemic barriers that keep mothers out of work, education or training. For that reason, we support the immediate provision of 30 hours of free childcare, as the motion calls for, but we recognise, as others do, that that does not go far enough. The provision of free childcare only when a child reaches the age of three and for only 38 weeks is restrictive at best. It does not address the impact on parents of children aged two and under, which, as we know, is when the motherhood gap begins. With some of the highest childcare costs in the world and very

restrictive paternity leave, it is women who are often forced to stay at home here.

Childcare should be offered not only in circumstances in which parents want to stay in work but in circumstances in which they want to return to education or training. We hear a lot in the Chamber about the need for a skilled workforce, and we should recognise that childcare costs actively keep parents out of education. Ultimately, we in People Before Profit want to see a national childcare agency that provides free childcare to parents who need it so that they can fully participate in society. As has been highlighted by the Childcare for All campaign, childcare should be child-centred and meet the needs of not just parents but childcare workers and providers. That means the provision of free childcare that is of a high quality and that meets educational and development needs in a safe, nurturing environment. It must guarantee that no child experiences poverty as a result of their parents' inability to access the workforce or cover the high costs of childcare. It means giving childcare workers a living wage, proper terms and conditions, and access to training. It means provision not being restricted to a very limited child age range.

We need to see flexible childcare that suits the needs of workers on all kinds of contracts. It needs to be moved into the public sphere so that it can work hand in hand with our Education Department and gender strategies. The benefits of that kind of universal childcare system — free at the point of access — would not just be economic benefits, allowing many more parents to get upskilled and into the workforce, or educational benefits for children. It would also tackle gender employment inequality and wider societal issues by removing the double burden on women and ensuring that the state take on a responsibility that it has shirked for far too long, which is to provide care for those who need it, at the earliest, the latest and the more difficult points of their life.

I support the motion today to implement 30 hours of childcare, but it is too restrictive. It will not alleviate the wider societal issues around childcare. For us, it is very much an intermediary step towards the establishment of a national childcare agency to provide childcare for all who need it. I urge those Executive members responsible for childcare to reach out and work closely with groups such as the Women's Resource and Development Agency and Employers For Childcare, which are leading the Childcare for All campaign.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There are four minutes remaining until the Minister is called. I thank almost everyone for being generous.

Ms Sugden: I support the motion generally, which has enabled a debate to take place on childcare provision and the need for the Northern Ireland Executive to develop and implement a childcare strategy. I thank the Members who tabled the motion.

Many who have spoken before me outlined the benefits of developing and implementing a childcare strategy. In a nutshell, we work, we spend and we improve the economy. Childcare is also important for children's development. The motion broadly reflects the five-party Government's agreed commitment in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document:

"The Executive will publish a Childcare Strategy and identify resources to deliver extended, affordable and high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4."

I had hoped, when the Government parties subsequently tabled a motion on childcare, that they would have expanded on that commitment. It is limited in that it focuses on the particular age group of three- and four-year-olds. Children under three years old also need to be considered.

That age group is where significant disparity between here and other regions of the UK exist.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Ms Sugden: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: I will be brief. The motion and the amendment were tabled by the DUP and Sinn Féin, not all the Government parties; indeed, one of the Government parties endeavoured to amend the motion to increase its scope, but that amendment was not selected.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Member for his intervention, but he is part of that Government all the same.

The commitment in NDNA does not change that because it still limits provision to three- to four-year-olds. We have an opportunity to develop a new childcare strategy that considers practice across the UK and Ireland and then develops a new policy that is right for Northern Ireland and improves on experiences elsewhere. That commitment and the motion very much feel like

a copy and paste, and, if that is the case, we will not see the tangible improvements that many Members have outlined.

I really hope that a Programme for Government is coming forward, because, given that we are three months into a two-and-a-half-year working mandate, it is unacceptable that we have not yet seen a programme for delivery. Let us not forget that 'New Decade, New Approach' is not a Programme for Government; it is a political agreement. In order to right the wrongs of the past three years, we need something to work from, but it is not forthcoming. When the Minister tables the commitment in the Programme for Government — I hope that he does so — I ask that he considers extending what was in the agreement.

I raise those concerns because I see how high childcare costs affect families. In 2020, parents still choose between their children and having a job, choosing between their family and a quality of life. If fortunate, there are grandparents or other family members who are able to support childcare. My parents are grandparents of seven children, and I know that they love taking care of their grandchildren, as it keeps them young, apparently — my father is 70 tomorrow — but I worry about the physical, emotional and financial burden that we are passing on to their generation. I do not think that parents have a choice under the current system, and it needs a radical change, more like what exists in other parts of the United Kingdom.

I appreciate the Minister of Education responding, and I am keen to hear his thoughts regarding childcare not just through early years education but through breakfast clubs and after-school clubs for children of school age after the age of four. Schools provide a fantastic service, but are they adding to their growing financial and other burdens, and will the Minister be able and willing to support those?

While the Minister of Education is responding, I have no doubt that the Minister for the Economy could also respond today on what it means for employers and businesses. I have no doubt that businesses will support the changes, if they are supported too.

I very much welcome the motion; indeed, I welcome the amendment, because it adds value to a good motion. We should all be coming from a position where we provide access to all people from all backgrounds in Northern Ireland. However, this requires more thinking, and it needs to go further than the political agreement when it gets to the Programme for Government.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I will try not to stray over the time, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I do not want you to cut off my microphone.

I thank my Assembly colleagues for tabling the motion and everybody who has contributed today. I am very content with the amendment, so I do not think that we should divide on the issue.

It was particularly valuable in today's debate that we were able to get in so many Members and that quite a number of them were able to draw on personal experience or that of family or friends to illustrate the issue, albeit that the vision of Pat Catney giving birth may give me nightmares tonight. I will have to deal with that.

The motion rightly highlights the dual aims proposed in the draft childcare strategy that was consulted on in 2015: child development and parental employment. Those are the twin tracks of this approach. I agree with the proposers that high-quality and affordable childcare can help to support parents to stay and progress in work — that point was made by a number of Members — while, for children, high-quality childcare can help to support their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development.

Childcare, when delivered in safe and stimulating environments, can be transformative for children and their families and can help to deliver a range of shared societal outcomes, address disadvantage and drive economic growth. At the point where families need childcare services, there should be a range of timely and clear information available to help them to make that important choice not just about provision but about the support available to help to offset the cost of childcare, which, as we know, can be a significant outlay for families.

4.15 pm

The availability of affordable and accessible childcare that is responsive to the needs of children and families is a key objective of the strategy. The aims and objectives of the strategy apply to all children up to the age of 12, and, in some cases, older children.

Ms Dillon: I appreciate the Minister taking the intervention. The issue is not only the availability of affordable childcare; in circumstances where parents have children with profound and severe disabilities, the

availability of any suitable childcare is the issue. Does the Minister agree?

Mr Weir: I appreciate that. We need to take a look, in particular, at families who are in those circumstances in order to deal with that issue.

I will come back to the wider context in a minute or two. I want to assure Members that in taking a finalised strategy to the Executive, I am not solely focused on children aged three to four. The principal focus, because of the offer that is potentially being made, is on children aged three to four, but we are not looking only at that cohort. There will be issues on affordability beyond that, which I will come to shortly. So, we are looking at the under-3s and school-age children, and there are levels of provision for them.

I will deal with a few of the points that have been raised. Claire Sugden raised the issue of breakfast clubs and a range of other facilities that are provided. Although there is a level of funding that is directly for childcare, because breakfast clubs and a number of those initiatives happen through schools, they are funded through the extended-schools programme. That initiative has worked very well and provided additional support, and it is something that I am keen to see continuing. As we look at the mix of funding that exists — for instance, the common funding formula — we will consider whether it can be mainstreamed or whether it needs to be ring-fenced.

I am trying to deal with specific requests to the Department, and we will be looking through the Hansard report to see whether there is anything else to address. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Karen Mullan, raised Bright Start intervention. The Bright Start school-age-children scheme was launched as a pilot in 2014, and an interim evaluation was completed and agreed in 2017. I plan to publish the evaluation, and I want to reassure Members that the findings from that evaluation and the subsequent reviews that were carried out by the managing agent — the Health and Social Care Board — will help to inform my consideration of the objectives of any future revised scheme, subject to Executive colleagues' consideration.

I recognise the need for childcare services and not just for those aged three to four. The Bright Start scheme has been an important step in making childcare more affordable for school-age children, particularly in rural areas and for disadvantaged families. So, in considering next steps, I will take into consideration the range of lessons learned from that review. Of course, I will also reflect on the 2015 consultation on the

draft strategy in relation to the Bright Start scheme.

In response to the motion, I will say that, in 'New Decade, New Approach' document, there is a key commitment on the Executive to:

"publish a Childcare Strategy and will give immediate priority to developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive, high-quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4."

Members may recall that a similar proposal was consulted on as part of the draft 2016 Programme for Government, and, whilst the hours per week are not stated in the commitment — we have a number of working assumptions based on the offers available elsewhere — mention has been made by a number of Members on what is available in another jurisdiction.

England and Wales have introduced extended offers to provide the equivalent of 30 hours per week of funded early learning and care provision for three- and five-year-olds. However, those additional hours are, generally speaking, only for working families. In England, for instance, 15 hours is provided universally, as, I think, Mr Newton mentioned, but qualification for the additional 15 hours is restricted to working families. In practical terms, that has meant that roughly half of the families have been able to avail themselves of that; there is an upper and lower limit. The eligibility might be questioned because it depends on whether there is full uptake.

Later this year, Scotland will introduce 30 hours of funded provision for all families with children aged three. The offers elsewhere in the UK vary, but what they all have in common is that they involve an element of universal preschool education as part of the offer.

In Northern Ireland, the preschool programme provides one year of funded early education to children in their immediate preschool years — aged three to four. While funded education is universally available, there is a mixed picture. The offers will vary between 12.5 hours and 22.5 hours for the 38 weeks. It was referred to by the Deputy Chair as essentially a part-time and full-time situation. The breakdown of that is, roughly speaking, a little over 60% is provided to children on a part-time basis of 12.5 hours and the remaining 38-40% will be on the full-time basis. The development of an extended early education and childcare offer must take

account of the existing pattern of preschool education. How we develop that extended offer in a way that maximises the opportunities to improve the outcomes for children and families is a key issue. Therefore, we need to consider the exact options that are put forward to standardise that, because universality is critical.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for giving way briefly. Has he costed the budget that would be necessary to standardise that preschool provision?

Mr Weir: There is a range of options that can be pursued. If we are talking about the most likely scenario — moving up to, for instance, a full 22.5 hours, with a wrap-around of perhaps 7.5 hours to bring it up to 30 hours — it would be in the region of about £45 million extra. There could be variations on that and there could be a range of scenarios, but we are talking about a considerable amount of money. Obviously, in considering this, I am conscious of the need to ensure that we can make an offer that allows us to deliver on the strategy's dual aims: parental employment and child development. There is an existing infrastructure that has taken 20 years to reach. If the Executive are going to embrace that change, it will require time to build up the physical infrastructure and the capacity of the workforce.

Picking up on another issue that the Deputy Chair raised, which was the nature and timing of legislation, there is an argument as to whether legislation is strictly legally needed. That may be questionable but, from the point of view of good practice, in other jurisdictions, this has been underpinned by legislation. As part of that process, it would have to be full legislation going through the Assembly, and we may be talking at least a year before that can happen. It depends on how that is scheduled.

Crucially, the barrier to any of this will not be whether legislation is in place but whether the funding is there. Obviously, an important element for the Executive will be the level of investment required. As Robin Newton said, investment can reduce the reliance on later interventions, and I know that can be something of great importance. Along with the work that is ongoing on nurture units and the nurture support, all these things can be an investment to save. However, as the motion acknowledges, there are significant pressures on the Education budget. I want to make it absolutely clear that, from the existing Education budget, I am not in a position to commit any funding to the childcare strategy. This will be a question for the Executive as a whole. If the Executive and the Assembly want to embrace a childcare

strategy — I am hearing universal voices — it will have to be paid in addition to what is going into the Education budget.

I appreciate that a number of Members made a very valid point, which is that there is a particular focus on three- to four-year-olds and should we not be looking at a much more extended offer. I do not have a problem with that but, again, I make the point that this will need to be additional money to what is in the Education budget. As an Assembly and as an Executive, we can have as much childcare as the Assembly is prepared to pay for. That will also be challenging in how we build up to that point but there is no limit on that side of things.

Ms Bailey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No. I only have another few minutes.

I want to highlight to Members the budget required to implement a childcare strategy. The answer that I gave to the Chair of the Committee was a rough figure, focused only on three- to four-year-olds. If we are going to have a much more extensive offer, we are talking about a much greater level of expenditure. As I said, it is a question of how much resource the Assembly is ultimately prepared to commit.

This is a long-term commitment. It cannot be provided with a cliff edge that does not secure funding for future years. It will take time to roll out the provision. If a childcare strategy were put before the Executive next week, it could not be immediately delivered. Pilot legislation will need to be put in place, and, in particular, we will need to build up the capacity of the sector through physical infrastructure and training. If providers are, for example, to expand from 12.5 hours to 22.5 hours, they will, in many cases, have split days. In that situation, it is not a question of them simply providing something in the afternoon because they do that already.

The needs of children must be central to the childcare strategy, as stakeholders, parents and children highlighted during the first phase of the consultation process. A wide range of evidence shows that early years education and care that are of sufficient quality have strong developmental benefits. We will need to bear that in mind as well.

The transfer of policy responsibility to my Department in May 2016 created opportunities for enhancing child development in a holistic way — educating children in the broadest sense. In many ways, simply dividing children between two Departments did not make sense objectively. I am all too aware of the need to

bring forward a coherent set of actions within a strategic framework to help to address a range of long-standing issues. The revised strategy will take account of those responses and of the policy priorities in New Decade, New Approach. Although not consulted on the draft childcare strategy, a number of respondents called for the provision for three- to four-year-olds to be increased to 30 hours, which would be similar to the increase in entitlement in England. I should make it clear that, when they said that, I suspect that they were looking very much at universality. Also, there must be wider aspirations for children aged between eight and 14. All of this is predicated on securing the resources, which, I repeat, will be critical.

I welcome the motion. In closing, I thank all Members for their contribution to discussions and their support for the motion. Progress on publication of an updated Executive childcare strategy is predicated on securing additional resources. I hope to be in a position to set out a definitive timescale for publication after the Executive's consultation on the Budget and the resources available to deliver those dual aims, including any legislation required to give effect to the agreed strategic actions.

Ms Kimmins: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. As a mother of a 13-month-old wee boy, I know only too well the difficulties that parents have. Like many others in the Assembly who have young children and require childcare, we are very fortunate that we can probably afford it. Some are not fortunate enough to have that luxury. I have good family support, which is not always the case.

However, the financial burden on parents is not the only reason why we need a radical childcare strategy. It would also allow parents, particularly mothers, to re-enter the workplace and progress their career. That has positive benefits for the economy. Moreover, as the motion states, good childcare can have a transformative role in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child. Importantly, wider societal benefits accrue from early intervention, and I will expand on that shortly.

An old Irish saying — *Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí* — means, praise the young and they will flourish. However, the young can flourish only in the right environment. There is a clear correlation between poverty and educational underachievement. The evidence is clear that children who fall behind in school often do not catch up and end up leaving school without qualifications. The evidence also tells us that those children are more likely to end up

with chronic ill health, physical or mental, which has repercussions for our health and social care system. Children without qualifications are also more likely to come to the attention of the police and the criminal justice system, with all the negative implications that that has for wider society.

The conclusion that we need to draw from that is that early intervention is not just desirable but an absolute necessity.

4.30 pm

We need to look elsewhere for best practice in childcare. I know that the systems and operations in Scotland and Wales were mentioned in the debate, but we should look further afield at the Nordic countries, particularly Finland. Finland is regularly held up as having the best education system in the world, so it should come as no surprise that it also has one of the best childcare systems. Free universal childcare is available from the age of eight months until the start of formal education at seven. Generally, Finnish children are raised to be independent from an early age, and it is quite usual for children to walk to and from school from the age of seven without adults. Of course, it helps that urban planners have been mindful for many decades of the need to provide safe infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists. The lessons that we need to learn from the likes of Finland are that, as well as having the best possible model of childcare, we need to ensure that all our Departments work together to design that model and eradicate obstacles such as poverty and disability, which may prevent children from reaching their full potential. That is what a comprehensive and radical childcare strategy will look like. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Maurice Bradley to conclude and wind up the debate on the substantive motion. Mr Bradley, you will have 10 minutes in which to speak.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I support the motion and the commitment to a childcare strategy in New Decade, New Approach. In Northern Ireland, our childcare strategy is falling further behind those of other devolved Administrations, offering, at present, 12.5 hours per week based on 38 weeks per year, compared with 22.5 hours in other areas. A survey of childcare costs in 2018 identified support from parents in Northern Ireland for a similar scheme to be rolled out here. Employers For Childcare is keen to explore how that may be extended,

subject to appropriate funding being made available to childcare providers to deliver a sustainable childcare strategy that is targeted where it is most needed. If the hours that are available are to be increased, funding needs to be in place to ensure that increased running costs can be met.

An innovative childcare strategy that is available to the most vulnerable and that perhaps allows them to commence or continue work while providing a pathway to education, makes it vital to invest in quality education and infrastructure in order to secure the best educational outcomes, meet the needs of families and allow them to remain in employment.

I would welcome a properly funded childcare strategy in Northern Ireland and one that would enable working parents to have access to additional hours of funded preschool education, which is, in effect, childcare, and the flexibility to allow parents the opportunity to access and stay in work. It is not good enough just to match some of the schemes in other devolved regions. The Executive should strive to improve, enhance and be better, if possible; to give support to working parents and the preschool educational needs of three- and four-year-olds. However, there would be a cost. The Minister has given a broad costing of £45 million, which would be higher if the age range is extended.

During the debate, several Members made some very valid points. Mervyn Storey said that the appropriate level of childcare and early learning should commence at an early age. Catherine Kelly said that it is a pathway to education for the most vulnerable, including parents, particularly single parents, of working-class families who struggle to make ends meet. Karen Mullan referred to inequality and said that the possible funding that would be required would be between £1 million and £50 million depending on the model that is chosen. Sinead McLaughlin said that the strategy was overdue, and that the financial benefit to families and opportunities that would be presented could not be measured. Robbie Butler said that it would enable parents to continue their career. Chris Lyttle, Chairperson of the Education Committee, said that equal access and affordable childcare are essential and that the benefits to a child's development cannot be measured. Other Members spoke in the debate, but, by and large, I sense that there is support for the motion and the amendment. I am happy to support both.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes that access to good quality and affordable childcare can help tackle disadvantage and poverty by closing the educational gap between the most and least advantaged children, can empower parents who want to stay and progress in paid work, and those who want to return to education or training; accepts that this, in turn, will contribute to the local economy; recognises the transformative role that good childcare can play in supporting the educational, social and physical development of a child; supports the aim of providing 30 hours of free childcare for 38 weeks a year for three- to four-year-olds, in line with the rest of the United Kingdom; further recognises that there are significant pressures already on the budget of the Department of Education; and calls upon the Executive to implement a childcare strategy and any legislation required to enable this to proceed.

Mental Health in the Workplace

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly recognises that mental health problems affect one in six workers each year, and that poor mental health is the leading cause of sickness absence; further recognises that Northern Ireland records the highest instance of mental ill health across the UK and has an ongoing mental health crisis; welcomes warmly the partnership between the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, Time to Change and the Retail Trust to address mental health in the retail industry; notes the important role that the retail industry plays as Northern Ireland's largest private-sector employer; supports the initiatives being progressed, including a mental health toolkit and mental health first aid training; and recommends that other industries follow this lead.

Mr Butler: I will not be moving the motion at this time. With the indulgence of other Members, I will return to it when we have a Minister to respond.

Motion not moved.

Adjourned at 4.36 pm.

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