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Assembly

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Wells, Jim (South Down)

# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 November 2015

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Speaker's Business

**Mr Speaker:** Before commencing business today, I want to bring a matter to the House's attention. Members will be aware that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee is gathering evidence for its inquiry into the Assembly and Executive Reform Bill. I will be submitting evidence on a range of matters in relation to the House's procedure, and I will put that evidence in the Library so that it is public for the information of all Members. However, the Bill also contains proposals in relation to the future election of the Speaker, so it is important for me to be clear that I have no self-interest in these proposals. I know that it is no secret to many Members, but I want to publicly put it on the record today that I will be stepping down as a Member of the Assembly at the end of this mandate. I will not, therefore, be seeking re-election as Speaker.

I turned 70 during the Hallowe'en recess, and I look forward to the opportunity of doing other things outside the Assembly. However, there will be plenty of time to be reflective at a later point, and I am making this announcement at this stage only to show proper courtesy to the House.

There is a lot of work in front of all of us in the next few months. There are a lot of issues that I still want to try to make progress on with not much time to do so. However, I am particularly focused on managing the heavy legislative workload that I am expecting to confront us in the months ahead. That will be challenging, and I will speak to the Business Committee about it today. So, let us move on.

## Executive Committee Business

### Shared Education Bill: Second Stage

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** I beg to move

*That the Second Stage of the Shared Education Bill [NIA 66/11-16] be agreed.*

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I know that you have said that there will be future opportunity to reflect on your announcement this morning, but I wish you belated birthday greetings and wish you well in your retirement.

The case for shared education has been well established. There is an extensive body of international research regarding the effectiveness of school collaboration generally and in divided societies more particularly. That has been supplemented by specific local evidence, particularly a series of evaluations of pilot projects, which were supported by investment from the International Fund for Ireland.

Shared education provides the opportunity to raise educational standards and encourage and facilitate a culture of mutual understanding through ongoing and purposeful engagement in learning between children and young people from different community backgrounds. The access for learners to a wider choice of subjects, increasing access to specialist teaching and modern facilities and sharing of good practice, makes a compelling educational case. The statutory curriculum provides a core enabling framework to promote shared education through the development of the young person as an individual, as a contributor to society and as a contributor to the economy and environment.

Local evidence has shown that participation in shared education leads to an increase in self-

confidence, self-awareness and self-reflection. Participants in high-quality shared education opportunities are more open to meeting others with differing perspectives and opinions and showed improved skills in problem-solving, decision-making and critical and creative thinking. All those skills are integral to the high-quality delivery of our curriculum. Equally, the opportunity afforded by shared education to make more effective and efficient use of facilities and resources provides a strong economic argument. My Bill seeks to realise those potential benefits offered through the collaborative, cross-community approach that shared education will provide.

In its report on shared and integrated education, which was published in July, the Education Committee accepted the need for a statutory definition for shared education. In the subsequent debate on the report in September, the Assembly endorsed its recommendations. My Bill will put that into effect.

I will turn to the Bill itself. This is a short Bill that provides a legislative definition of shared education and places a power on the Department and its arm's-length bodies to encourage and facilitate shared education. The Bill will also enact the duty on the Education Authority to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education, as provided in the Education Act 2014. In its report on shared and integrated education, the Committee recommended that the statutory obligation to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education, as set out in the Education Act, should be extended to my Department and all its relevant arm's-length bodies. The Education Reform Order 1989 places a duty on my Department to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education. It is my considered view that it would not be helpful to now place a duty on my Department that would include a requirement to additionally "promote" shared education without any similar requirement to promote integrated education or, indeed, Irish-medium education. I am also firmly of the view that a power rather than a duty is the best approach at this juncture.

Shared education is still a relatively new and evolving area, and good practice is still being developed. We need to accrue good practice learning before placing a legal obligation on our education system that entails mandatory action. A power gives the flexibility to encourage and build confidence within the education system and the wider community around the benefits of shared education and to remove doubts about perceived risks voiced by some who responded to my Department's consultation. It also avoids

any risk of communities perceiving that shared education is being imposed on them rather than encouraging and facilitating communities to move at a pace that they find acceptable.

The Bill will be underpinned by Sharing Works, my policy for shared education, which was published on 16 September. Sharing Works expands on the legislative definition by providing a practical description of how shared education will work in practice. The description is based on that which was endorsed by the ministerial advisory group on advancing shared education, the establishment of which was a Programme for Government commitment. The policy contains a series of actions that my Department will take forward by way of encouraging and facilitating shared education. The actions are based on the recommendations of the ministerial advisory group.

The Bill will send a strong signal to the education sector and the wider community that shared education is now a key feature of our education system moving forward. The Bill and the policy have been subject to equality screening and public consultation. Both have been generally welcomed by stakeholders and provide an opportunity to build a more inclusive approach at a pace that communities are comfortable with and that does not threaten any particular sector. In conclusion, I recommend the Bill to Members and will carefully consider today's debate in moving my Bill forward.

**Mr Weir (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I wish you well in your retirement. As part of the somewhat ageing class of '98, I think that you are one of the few Members in the Chamber who has reached the age of 70. I hope that I look as well when I am 70. I hope to actually reach the age of 70, but that is another bridge to be crossed.

The Committee has considered the Bill in considerable depth. It undertook, and recently reported on, an inquiry into shared and integrated education. A key recommendation of that report was that there should be a statutory obligation on the Department and its arm's-length bodies to encourage the participation of all schools in shared education, and I welcome the Bill in going some way to meeting that recommendation. I anticipate that Committee members will generally give a broad welcome to the Bill in principle and will want to take it through the Committee Stage in order to examine the need for amendments.

As the Minister indicated, the Bill is relatively short, so I expect that some of the examination

will be to ensure that the detail is got right and to look at areas where there may be a concern that the Bill does not go far enough or perhaps leaves something out. However, those will be matters for Consideration Stage.

As the Minister said in his opening remarks, the Bill is the legislative underpinning for the Department's Sharing Works policy. That policy defines shared education as cross-sectoral, inclusive cooperation between educational providers, delivering educational benefits and promoting good relations. The definition of that policy goes a considerable way towards the Committee's recommendation on the definition of shared education. As the Bill is focused in that regard, it is not surprising that it provides less definition on the policy than the policy itself. That is to be expected.

However, the Bill does not make explicit reference to educational improvement, it does not emphasise the importance of shared education being based on curriculum-based activities, and it seems to restrict inclusion to Protestants and Catholics and to socio-economic deprivation. The Minister outlined his reasons for suggesting that: namely that the Bill gives the Department and others a power — not a duty — to encourage and facilitate shared education. I suspect that those are issues that the Committee will want to tease out at Consideration Stage.

I would like to deal with some of those issues. First, educational improvement. The Committee previously indicated that it strongly believed that the unique selling point of shared education was its focus on improving the educational attainment of participants. That was evidenced in programmes operated by the Centre for Shared Education and others. It was clearly critical to winning the trust and securing the participation of those who are a little wary of engagement with neighbouring communities or are a little suspicious of the motives of the Department of Education. I am sure that the Minister would say that those are ill-founded suspicions. Nevertheless, they appear. Therefore, the absence in the Bill of a direct reference to educational improvement is a little disconcerting.

Also absent is a linkage to supporting the curriculum. Witnesses to the inquiry felt that that lack of clarity allowed all sorts of activities to be questionably labelled as shared education. The witnesses argued that that served to debase the term and allowed detractors to dismiss it as a light touch and as supporting the status quo.

During our consideration of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Bill, Members talked about the inclusion of a purposes clause in that Bill. A discussion on whether we need a purposes clause for shared education may resurface during Committee Stage. Such a change might provide a level of definition and certainty, without limiting schools' imagination in respect of shared education programmes.

I talked about what shared education is; it is just as important to know and talk about who is going to be doing shared education. The Bill mentions reasonable numbers of Protestant and Catholic children. When we had a pre-briefing on that by the Department, the purpose of that was to allow a level of flexibility. I suppose where we are always trying to strike a balance in these things is on the issue between flexibility and providing schools with a level of certainty. I suppose it will be interesting to obtain the views of the Minister on that. For example, if we are talking about reasonable numbers, how will that be interpreted, and can that mean, for example, that it can be provided for in sharing between schools in a single sector?

The Committee, during its inquiry, also felt that the relevant section 75 groups should be covered by shared education and that it should promote attitudinal improvement and meaningful contact between them. Again, we will want to see whether this will be covered directly by the Bill.

#### **10.45 am**

As I indicated, the Bill gives the Department and some arm's-length bodies — and I think that it is important that it does not focus purely on the Department but covers arm's-length bodies — powers and not duties. The Minister has explained why he believes that that should be the case, but we, as a Committee, wonder whether this sits a little inconsistently with the obligations on the Education Authority as set out in the Education Act 2014. Again, members may well want to look at that during the anticipated Committee Stage.

The Bill does not refer to measures of educational improvement associated with the shared education signature project. I suspect that this will be mentioned in today's debate. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I simply remind the House that the Education Committee supports the measurement and reporting of educational improvements associated with all shared education

programmes. However, the Committee has repeatedly advised the Department:

*"that given: the concerns previously expressed by the General Teaching Council NI in respect of the efficacy of LoPs; the very low levels of participation; and the ongoing related industrial action, it was both surprising and unwise for the Department"*

to make Levels of Progression part of the funding criteria for participation in the shared education signature programme. I know from correspondence with the Minister, at the levels of MLA and Committee member, that he is trying to resolve this and, indeed, is in discussions with the various teaching bodies and unions. However, we, as a Committee, are keen that some of the problems that have arisen there are not repeated when we pass this Bill.

In concluding my remarks as Chair in anticipation of the Committee Stage, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Department and our stakeholders. We have issued a call for evidence, so I suspect that the latter are busy drafting their responses and will submit those within a relatively short time frame. Given that we are close to the end of the mandate and that the Committee has dealt with this in a full report, I expect the Committee Stage to be short and rather intense. I appeal then to officials and stakeholders to be flexible as we consider this important legislation. It is the Committee's intention to do its job well and quickly. We see no desire to hold up the Bill, and we ask for everyone's cooperation in this task.

I will now make some remarks not as Chair of the Committee but as a DUP MLA. I give a broad welcome to the legislation. I have highlighted some areas where I would like to see some level of change. The legislation, by its nature, is not going to be perfect. To be fair, that is not necessarily a criticism of the legislation, because we have to recognise two things. First, legislation in and of itself will not do everything as regards shared education. A lot of work will have to happen on the ground that is not appropriate for legislation. Really, what we are looking for in legislation is a broad framework that aids what is happening. Secondly, it is also important to realise that there are many good shared education projects already happening. We are not starting simply with a blank page. We are looking to see a broadening and deepening of shared education. As such, we need to provide a framework for it and a facilitation of it; that would be helpful.

A number of benefits can accrue from shared education. The Minister has highlighted some of them, and I suspect that others will make reference to them in their speeches. There is a broader societal benefit. There is the commonly understood area of community relations of various sections of society working together, which I think that everyone would acknowledge is a benefit. There is also something else, and I think that it is important and right that the Bill makes direct reference to it. We often think of the community relations side of it as being purely between the two main sections of the community, but the emphasis in the Bill on socio-economic interaction is also very helpful.

I think that that will be of benefit to society as well. Also, and I concur with the Minister in this, it is not just about the broader, wider, societal benefits but the benefits to individual pupils who are involved in shared education. The widening of their experiences and the broadening of their confidence is something that will be helpful.

Secondly, I think that there is a broad educational benefit. That will come down to where we see the particular definitions in this. Undoubtedly, this should be a driver. While the focus will largely be on the societal benefits, I believe that cooperation between schools can be of benefit educationally and can help, for instance, pupils in one area to be linked in with another, and they can learn from each other's experiences. That should be an educational driver. It is right also that the legislation goes beyond schools and looks, for instance, at youth settings and indeed has the full panoply across that.

Also, it has been highlighted that — particularly when it comes to issues around IT and, perhaps, in the future, issues around personnel as well — in tight economic times, when we are trying to get the best possible value for everybody involved in the education system, sharing can lead to a higher level of efficiency in the system. We see sometimes, particularly with small schools, a movement at times to a situation of joint management of schools and sharing between principals of schools, which can be helpful as well. Whereas it is important that schools play a vital role in communities, that should not simply be used as a device to protect the existence of a school when that school is really unsustainable, but I think that there are efficiencies in the system that could be driven by shared education, and there are benefits to be had there.

The Bill itself is widely drawn in terms of what is meant by shared education. Mention has

already been made of the socio-economic impact, and it is right that there should be flexibility, because there is a wide range of activities out there in shared education, which we should encourage. I welcome the fact that the focus is very much on the provider and the sectors, whether through the Department, the arm's-length bodies and the youth settings. I believe that that format looks to the main providers but gives space for schools to develop at their own pace and in their own way. There are models of shared education that will be of benefit. Here, we need to see a degree of balance. There is also a need to ensure that schools can move forward with clear understanding as well.

The representatives of the Department indicated to the Committee that they would judge things on a case-by-case basis, and, yes, there is a need for a level of flexibility. However, as I indicated when speaking as Chair, I expect that there will be suspicions within the sector. We do not want to see a situation where anyone at the Department of Education — given the timescale for this, it will probably not apply to the current Minister but to his successor or his officials — sees himself as playing the role of mighty Caesar in the gladiatorial arena, giving a thumbs up or thumbs down, at whim, to particular projects. Schools need a level of certainty.

Linked to that is the issue of educational benefits. It is important that we put at the heart of this an educational driver. If assessment is to be used as part of the process of measuring that, we must have widely and clearly agreed means of assessment that have the confidence of the wider sector. The experience that we had with the shared education signature projects is one that we want to avoid. I suspect that it will be highlighted in this debate that we have reached a situation where a differential approach is taken in different areas of Northern Ireland. Because of the advice they have had, some schools feel confident simply to plough ahead; others are, at the moment, without funding, because they are caught as schools in a degree of dispute between the teaching unions, on the one side, and the Department, on the other.

That is a situation we want to avoid. Moving ahead, this should be focused on clearly agreed methods of assessment.

It is also important that we take a curriculum-orientated — indeed, a whole-school — approach to shared education. Flexibility is important. It comes back to balance. Shared education and cooperation between schools will

operate in slightly different ways. From the point of view of the DUP — I suspect that the Committee will take a similar view — we do not want that to be tokenistic in its nature. It is not simply a question of two schools ticking a box to receive a level of funding, but that it is very much curriculum-orientated. In doing that, as I said, we have to encompass the full range of possibilities.

There are a range of issues for us to look at, and I will come on to a final one in a moment, but it would be churlish of me not to admit that this Bill is a step in the right direction. It is good legislation. The role of the Committee will be to take what is good and debate the ways in which it can be further improved.

In conclusion, and I appreciate the position that the Minister has taken, I share the view expressed in the Committee report that we need to look at an obligation, particularly on the higher-level bodies, rather than simply a power. I think that the wording is a little bit weak in that regard, and that is something that we as a Committee will need to look at. I look forward to the Consideration Stage. I believe that this can improve our education system, improve the opportunities for all our children and improve Northern Ireland, but let us make sure that we get the best possible Bill. That will be the key challenge for the Committee in the few weeks ahead.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I start by paying tribute to you following your announcement this morning. Your leadership and vision in this place, both as an MLA and as Speaker, will be badly missed. I had the pleasure to serve with you when you were Assembly private secretary (APS) to the Minister of Education, and it was a thoroughly enjoyable role, but unfortunately I was not left on the Education Committee long enough to cause the Minister too many problems. That is the role of a Back-Bench MLA.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in the Second Stage debate on the Shared Education Bill. I start by acknowledging the very many solid examples of sharing and cooperation by many schools across many different sectors. It is only right that I commend the leadership of MLAs from all parties in this Chamber who, in their role as community leaders, have grasped the issue of shared education and promoted it, but also the small number of MLAs who, as parents of children participating in the shared education programme, have really taken the bull by the horns and engaged with their school communities, their peers and other parents to



sell the benefits of the programme. It is good to see parents and MLAs from all sides doing that.

During the Committee inquiry into shared education, members of the Committee felt strongly that societal objectives were important and should extend beyond reconciliation of the two largest groups in our society in order to fully incorporate all section 75 groups. The Committee also felt that the statutory objective to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education should be extended to the Department and arm's-length bodies, and with that in mind I welcome the proposals contained in the Shared Education Bill.

The clear intent of the Bill is to provide a legislative definition of shared education, which is missing from legislation at the minute. There is a lot of talk about shared education, but there is not really any great understanding of what it means. A legislative definition of shared education will be very welcome.

The Bill will confer a power on the Department and its arm's-length bodies to both encourage and facilitate shared education, and it sets in train when the legislation will kick in. The legislation and policy is underpinned by the whole notion of Sharing Works, which is a policy for shared education. The four clauses of the Bill are quite self-explanatory, and anyone who is interested in reading them can, or probably already has.

One of the recommendations from the Committee inquiry that I would like to give some consideration to deals with the whole issue of measurement. Recommendation 6 of the inquiry stated that:

*"the Department should give consideration to a wide range of agreed, objective impact measures ... based on educational improvement ... and societal reconciliation progress ... should be published regularly by the Department."*

I am keen to hear from the Minister, either today or at a later stage, as to how that will be advanced.

#### **11.00 am**

As Members know, the county of Fermanagh has played a leading role in the development of the shared education programme and in rolling it out across the county so that people from Fermanagh, from all sections of our community, have had the chance to engage. My daughter, who is in P2, participates in the shared

education programme in St Mary's Primary School in Tempo with Tempo Primary School, which is a controlled school. She thoroughly enjoys it, primarily because she went to a cross-community preschool — the only one in the village. She made a number of friends there who were not from a Catholic background and who now attend the controlled primary school. When she went into P1 and the shared education programme was brought to the school for the first afternoon, I saw such joy in that child's face when I came home. She was able to tell me that she had met her young friends whom she had not seen since preschool.

It is good that the programme is in place to allow children to make new friendships with people from a different background and also to keep existing friendships going. All too often, we hear stories of people from different generations who really did not engage or make friends with people from another background. I am talking about people from a Catholic tradition, a Protestant tradition and neither, who do not get to engage with people from another community until much later in life, whether in the workplace or at university. The shared education programme, and the concept of providing our children with the opportunity to engage in shared education, is a good opportunity to give them.

I commend the leadership shown by the Fermanagh Trust, which is one of the key organisations behind the shared education programme, and its trustees and staff, as well as the school communities in Fermanagh and across the North that have embraced this concept. The principals, staff and boards of governors of those schools have shown tremendous leadership for their communities in articulating what the benefits of shared education could mean for our society. This is much bigger than any individual child, family or school community; this is about trying to build a better future for all our young people. The leadership shown by the organisations involved in developing and rolling out shared education, as well as by the parents and school communities that have embraced it, has given us all an insight into how popular this area is and how much demand exists, so it is only right and proper that we see legislation being brought forward to enhance it further.

It is also important to reflect on the success of the shared education programme in Fermanagh, in the sense that it is not just cross-community but cross-border. A number of the maintained schools along the border corridor regularly engage and share with

minority Protestant schools on the other side of the border. Protestant schools from the South come up to engage with children from a Catholic background in the North, which is tremendous, because not only do we have a problem in the North with children from both backgrounds not engaging with each other but we have a serious problem with neighbours from Fermanagh and Leitrim or Fermanagh and Donegal not engaging. The shared education programme in Fermanagh has also helped to break down those barriers.

In engaging with parents, teachers and school leaders across Fermanagh, it is easy to see the empirical evidence of the benefits of shared education in how it helps our children to develop, to broaden their minds and to know that their identity is not the only one. There is no one identity here that is more right or more justified than the other. All of us come from different backgrounds and mentalities, and it is important that we allow young people, at an early age, to establish that there are other people out there who hold different views. That is one of the key benefits of the shared education programme, and it also helps to break down community relations and tensions between communities.

We do not have peace walls in Fermanagh. We do not live cheek by jowl with people from the other community. In Fermanagh, by and large, there are whole villages made up of more than 95% of one or other section of the community. Take the village of Kesh, which is predominantly Protestant or unionist, and then take a village such as Rosslea, which is, on the other hand, more than 95% nationalist.

We do not have the same situation as in Belfast, where they have peace walls between our two communities. We have completely divided our society, and people live in different places. That is the way it is done. There is not necessarily anything wrong with it, but in how we break down the barriers and get our people to engage with it, it is widely accepted that we need to start at an early age and get people mixing from other backgrounds at as early an age as possible. That is why the shared education programme has been hugely successful.

I think we would all agree that, if we were starting with a blank canvas, we would not put in place the systems and mechanisms that we have for providing education today, but this is a step in the right direction. It is good to see the Assembly coming together to give statutory bodies the legislative power to facilitate and encourage shared education, but it is not about

competing, and it is not contrary to the views of those who articulate a vision for integrated education. Not all of our citizens are at a place where they want to see integrated education yet. Many people in our society do, and several opinion polls indicate the support that exists for it, but there are some within our society who are not there yet. The provision of an option of shared education to those people will highlight the benefits that moving to such a system can bring. It is complementary to the whole notion of integrated education, which grows year on year, but the concept of shared education is growing as well, and it is something that we should encourage.

I will express some concern about what I see as the entrenched positions of the former education and library boards and CCMS. The Minister announced his plans to carry out the area planning process in September 2012 or 2013 — I cannot remember which year it was. It is clear to see, when you look through the reports that were generated, that there was not enough joint planning done. CCMS went and did its plan and the education and library board did its plan, but there was no effort made to join those two things together, despite the fact that, in many communities, there was a strong desire for joint planning to take place to provide the best possible education for our young people in a joint approach. The statutory bodies were somewhat behind.

I recognise that we are conferring a power to encourage and facilitate shared education on the Education Authority, the Department, the library boards and a couple of other organisations, but I just wonder whether that mindset remains within the higher echelons of those organisations, and how we as an Assembly and a society can challenge those mindsets and try to get the people who are in leadership positions in those organisations to take the views of people in society and actually move ahead with joint area planning, as was requested or mandated of them by the Minister of Education.

In conclusion, it is clear to see that our young people benefit educationally, personally and intellectually from engaging with people from another community or another background. There is an onus on us as an Assembly to do all that we can to facilitate, encourage and promote that. I think the Bill is an excellent first step. I hope that it passes. I am sure it will; it seems to have cross-party support and is something that all MLAs have spoken positively about in the past. I wish members of the Committee well as they strive to carry out the

Committee Stage that will follow. I will keep a close eye on the Bill.

**Mr Rogers:** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Second Stage of the Bill. The SDLP is broadly supportive of the Bill. Our schools need to move more and more towards models of sharing — sharing expertise, resources, facilities and educational experiences.

It is clear for the SDLP that principles of shared education must be firmly embedded in the curriculum. It is about more than schools coming together for an annual sports tournament or a walk up the Mourne. Shared education must be deep, meaningful and sustained. Clause 2 of the Bill is particularly important in that regard. Shared education can be delivered in many forms. It can range from large-scale projects at Lisanelly to the sharing of particular resources within specific classes. It remains the case that it would not be feasible to establish projects like Lisanelly all across the North. It takes a substantial amount of money and a high threshold of local agreement. We must be realistic if we want shared education to work. We must work within our constraints. There are constraints such as rural isolation, and there are financial constraints as well.

There are many smarter ways that we can achieve meaningful sharing in classrooms. The sharing of IT infrastructure already exists within schools in Northern Ireland. I am somewhat disappointed that the Department has not really taken on board the definition of shared education that the Committee agreed, which was:

*"curriculum-based interactions that always foreground educational improvement and involve children and young people in sustained whole school/organisation activities across ... educational phases while making optimal use of ... IT infrastructure."*

From the Department's response at the Committee last week, it is clear that it has ICT as an optional tool for schools to use. Given the huge investment by the Department in C2k and projects that have used ICT for inter-school links like, for example, Dissolving Boundaries, which proved how effective blended contact is, using ICT as an option is wasteful of shared public resources and is likely to mean that schools in rural areas will have difficulties in finding partners that they can work effectively with. Schools should be required to show how they plan to use ICT, not whether they intend to use it. That is important for schools that are

close geographically as well as those that are far further apart.

I think of the Dissolving Boundaries project and go back to my background; it is probably nearly 20 years since we were involved in that project. I remember sitting in a history lesson — it was very appropriate for the time of year — in which children from a school in Kilkeel were working with children in Taunton in Somerset on a World War I project, and the children in Taunton talked about their grandparents in the trenches. That shows how ICT can bring the sharing of education alive — not just even on a Northern Ireland basis but across our island and across Europe.

The Department has referred to supporting shared education in initial teacher education. It is not clear who will provide the funding for that or how that process will be managed. Maybe that can be addressed.

We talk about ICT as an essential tool in shared education. The assessment of ICT will become statutory in 2016-17. That will include the use of ICT for exchange — using ICT to exchange ideas and information with others, such as partner schools. As a former teacher, and knowing how teachers work, I feel that we have a better chance of these projects coming together and working well in the classroom when shared education can work along with the requirements of ICT assessment and when teachers become more motivated by it and tuned into it.

Children will benefit when they learn the same subject together, not in different rooms of the same building. In that way, shared education that is embedded in the curriculum can be delivered without creating super-school structures. Furthermore, I welcome the Shared Education Bill as I hope that it will help the Department to become strategic in relation to the delivery of shared education. A number of schools that have engaged in real sharing of resources have had funding cut as a result of an apparent link to the Key Stage assessment. That is entirely counterproductive and will make the transition to shared education much more difficult.

Clause 3 of the Bill puts a statutory obligation on the Education Authority to promote education. That should benefit the strategic delivery of shared education. I suppose that when we talk about shared education, we have to think about the mutual benefits of shared education. First and foremost, it is about addressing educational underachievement and ensuring that children achieve their potential. It

is about children benefiting from learning together and embracing religious and cultural diversity. In turn, society will benefit from that.

It would be remiss of me if I did not acknowledge the great work that goes on in shared education at the moment. I think of the integrated sector and Shimna Integrated College in my constituency — the work that goes on in that school, and also the outreach work that it does with primary schools.

#### 11.15 am

Other schools, such as my old school St Louis working with Kilkeel High and schools that have a really good mix across their school population, schools such as St Columbanus in Bangor, Down High and Strabane Academy. I could go on and on.

We had a presentation from Cross and Passion and from Ballycastle in County Antrim. The one that I have been associated with for a long time is Limavady learning partnership. However, thinking of those two in particular, part of their success has been in the culture in the schools and their geographical proximity, which helps as well.

When I talk about sharing, I think about taking it that bit further to staff sharing their expertise and professional development. We can use ICT as a great tool again there. If you are to do professional development and you teach in Kilkeel or Belcoo, it is a long trip to Belfast for that professional development, so we can use ICT and so on to deliver these things online. Beyond that, we must share business and schools to ensure that our schools are tuned in to what the business world requires and understands what our schools are like.

However, it remains the case that the vast majority of children in the primary and post-primary sectors attend single-denomination schools. So we need to broaden the debate not just to sharing between Protestant and Catholic but to all section 75 groups. The SDLP envisages that sharing education will lead to more diverse opportunities for our schools, children, teachers and for senior leadership in our schools. Shared education is a priority for society here. That can be delivered only by promoting a culture of mutual understanding of society here through a purposeful shared curriculum in Northern Ireland.

There are many opportunities in shared education that I have only touched on. The Bill offers a first step.

**Mrs Overend:** We have before us the much-anticipated, long-awaited Shared Education Bill. Comprising four clauses that fit onto an A4 piece of paper, the Bill is nothing if not concise. It is not, however, visionary. It is minimalist legislation that certainly does not set out a road map for a Utopian shared future in education.

It should perhaps not come as a surprise that the Shared Education Bill is short. Last December, when the Committee was holding its inquiry into shared and integrated education, we had an interesting evidence session with the centre for shared education at Queen's University. The centre argued that the lack of coordinated policy or clear definition of shared education has created a policy vacuum that allows it to be labelled as "light touch" and supportive of the status quo. It was noted that this also affects the depth of meaningful activity and limits the potential of shared education to effect lasting systemic change.

The centre called for legislation that will provide a consensus on the definition of shared education. So, almost a year down the track, the question is this: does the definition of shared education in the Bill and the policy that underpins it provide us with a working and workable definition that commands widespread support?

I know that the definition is also a concern for other Education Committee members, as the issue was raised by many of them during our recent briefing on the Bill. At Second Stage, it is worth looking at the evolution of the definition of shared education. I hope that Members will bear with me, but I feel that it is important to look at the various definitions. The Bain report of December 2006 described shared education as a cross-sectoral approach to education, where:

*"children grow up to feel comfortable in their own uniqueness and comfortable with difference. For that to happen, they need to be able to work together and 'play' together so that eventually, they can assume a shared responsibility for their future."*

The definition of shared education used by Queen's University's centre for shared education is:

*"Shared education is broadly defined as any collaborative activity within or between schools or other educational institutions that can: contribute towards school improvement, provide access to opportunity, encourage more effective use of resources, and promote social cohesion"*

The definition that the ministerial advisory group was asked to use in 2012 involved the organisation and delivery of education so that it:

*"Meets the needs of, and provides for the education together of, learners from all Section 75 categories and socio-economic status; involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements; and Delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion."*

The Sharing Works policy was published on 1 December this year. It states:

*"Shared Education is described as the organisation and delivery of education so that it: meets the needs of, and provides for the education together of learners from all Section 75 categories and socio-economic status; involves schools and other education providers of differing ownership, sectoral identity and ethos, management type or governance arrangements; and delivers educational benefits to learners, promotes the efficient and effective use of resources, and promotes inclusion in terms of equality of opportunity, good relations, equality of identity, respect for diversity and community cohesion."*

*Specifically, Shared Education involves the sustained provision of opportunities for children and young people from different community, as well as social and economic, backgrounds to learn together.*

*It is expected that Shared Education will be organised and delivered in such a way that promotes equality of opportunity and social inclusion by providing opportunities for children from differing Section 75 groups (e.g. children from different religious backgrounds, children from different racial backgrounds, children with and without disabilities, children who are carers or school age mothers) and from differing socioeconomic backgrounds to learn together at school and in less formal education."*

From all that, we have a boiled-down definition in the Bill. Clause 1(2) states:

*"Shared education" means the education together of—*

*(a) those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons; and*

*(b) those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not,*

*which is secured by the working together and co-operation of two or more relevant providers."*

I feel that the Assembly needs clarity on why the Department has gone for such a short definition.

The explanatory and financial memorandum of the Bill states that funding has been committed to support the implementation of shared education up to June 2018. The Minister says that funding will be mainstreamed after that and for the longer term. In the past, when short-term funded programmes that focused on community relations ended, so did the schemes.

In the Sharing Works policy, the Department is committed to increasing the percentage of pupils to 80% within four years. To put it mildly, this is ambitious and will place huge logistical demands on schools. Option 4 in the shared education business plan estimates that scaling up would cost £44 million. As legislators, we have a duty to seriously question the wisdom of spending the £44 million that it is estimated it would take to expand sharing between segregated sectors at a time when basic maintenance in schools is being neglected and special needs teaching is being squeezed.

It seems to me that the basic problem is that we have not even begun to tackle the lack of consensus on where we want to go as a society. Perhaps that lack of consensus is the reason why we have such a minimalist and unambitious Bill in front of us today. We have seen some very good work undertaken in the area of shared education over the past decade. Since the phrase first emerged in the Bain report of December 2006, there has been extensive academic research carried out in the School of Education at Queen's. Commitments were inserted into the Programme for Government and the ministerial advisory group reported in 2012.

We have the shared education campuses programme being rolled out. We have also had the recently published report from the Education Committee on shared and integrated education and the recent publication of 'Sharing

Works: A Policy for Shared Education' from the Department of Education.

One would have thought that, with all that activity, the political class in the Assembly would have come to some sort of understanding on the issue and on the way forward. However, go back to 27 January this year and reread the adjournment debate on St Mary's teacher training college. An objective reviewer of that debate could only come up with one conclusion: that the overriding priority in education for the two nationalist parties in the Assembly is the protection of the Catholic maintained sector, and that any sharing must not compromise the ethical purity of that sector and its distinctive religious and Irish identity. That is an absolutely valid and defensible position to take up; just do not, at the same time, come out with rhetoric about a shared future. It constantly amazes me to see the Minister at the Dispatch Box railing against the perceived evils of separating children by academic selection at the age of 11.

He has never shown the same concern about separating children at age five, never mind at age 11, on the basis of religious denomination. Suddenly, in that scenario, the concept of parental choice trumps everything else.

To continue on the same theme, if we are to have sharing in education, surely there should be no barriers to teachers from all community backgrounds and none taking up employment in any grant-aided publicly funded school in Northern Ireland. The fair employment exemption and the certificate are two obvious barriers. On 13 April this year, the Assembly debated an Ulster Unionist motion proposed by Danny Kinahan, who is now the MP for South Antrim, that stated:

*"this Assembly notes the failure of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to repeal the exemption in fair employment law allowing discrimination on the grounds of religious belief in teacher appointments, as mandated by the motion Teachers: Employment Law, which was approved by the Assembly on 22 April 2013; recognises that the teacher exemption, as well as the continuing requirement for a certificate in religious education at nursery and primary level in the Catholic maintained sector, are unnecessary barriers to truly shared education; and calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take action to remove these overt examples of inequality and discrimination." — [Official Report, Vol 103, No 6, p19, col 2].*

To remind Members, it was about the fact that, in 2015, the teaching profession is exempt from fair employment regulations here. Moreover, in the maintained sector, at nursery and primary level, schools can insist on applicants for teaching posts having a Catholic RE certificate. The Bill does not address those anomalies. The position of the Minister of Education is massively muddled on these issues. One minute, he says that he has written to OFMDFM on the certificate issue; the next, he says that he made a slip and that he actually wrote to it on the teacher exemption issue. Then he admits that he never wrote to it at all and just laughs the whole thing off.

In the debate on our motion on 13 April, nationalist MLAs lined up to defend the status quo. Mr Rogers of the SDLP said:

*"Many parents want their children to be taught in a Catholic ethos". — [Official Report, Vol 103, No 6, p44, col 1].*

He added:

*"The religious education provided by our teachers is essential for the right foundation in life and the development of the Catholic ethos. Our primary-school teachers do not teach just religious education but the whole curriculum. The Catholic ethos permeates all aspects of the curriculum." — [Official Report, Vol 103, No 6, p44, col 1].*

Winding on that debate, I said:

*"do we actually want a shared society and a shared future? That is something that everyone in the Assembly must ask themselves. If some want the perpetuation of inequality, segregation and a shared-out future, they should be honest and say so. Some recent debates in the House suggest that more than a few prefer the status quo; however, there can be no genuine shared education under the current circumstances. Without change, the shared education concept can never succeed. Unless schools have interchangeable staff, the whole project will not be balanced and, for practical reasons, will not work." — [Official Report, Vol 103, No 6, p52, col 1].*

I repeat that challenge today. Surely shared education cannot be simply about bussing children from one type of school to share, say, a physics GCSE class with children from another type of school in order to make up the numbers. Surely shared education cannot simply be about building a new school building

to accommodate two schools, with the children entering the front door and half turning right and half turning left. It seems that, for some, sharing is to be undertaken only on their own terms and must not lead to a process of integration or a dilution of the ethos of their individual sector.

After the Bain review of 2006, the Catholic maintained sector did its own thing and independently rationalised its schools estate. The area planning process conducted by the former education and library boards happened after that. In one large provincial town, a Catholic maintained secondary and a state controlled secondary had, for over a decade, developed a shared learning community; they had established formal links and shared classes to develop the curriculum. After the maintained sector rationalised its schools estate, that all stopped; sharing across the traditional divide ended. That was six years ago.

It is not all doom and gloom. Good practice is continuing in many parts of the country, including in my constituency of Mid Ulster. However, despite talk of shared campuses and shared education, the current picture is mixed and patchy. Some could question the Minister's commitment to the delivery of the signature projects on shared education as the schools applying to participate, and even those already signed up to participate, are the only schools in Northern Ireland that are being pressurised to adhere to specific assessment criteria that are still the subject of a dispute between the unions and the Department. Time is of the essence in finding a resolution here as time progresses for the successful delivery of each project where funds can be spent appropriately.

### 11.30 am

I know of a proposed project that aims to focus on children in the foundation years. That is surely admirable, as they are building a shared education ethos from the beginning of their school years, but the assessments that are being called for take place on older children in the school. In actual fact, the assessments of that school are not relating to the actual shared education project that would be implemented in that school. Those are the sorts of anomalies that need to be thought about, and a resolution must be found in that area. The Chair of the Committee knew that I might raise the issue of the assessments. I believe that the type of assessment is not necessarily key, but rather that some type of assessment is made.

The shared education that the Ulster Unionist Party believes in must lead somewhere. There

is no indication in the Bill that it will lead anywhere. Is the Assembly serious about a shared future? Is it serious about shared education? What do we mean by shared education? The answers to those fundamental questions are not to be found on the A4 page that contains the four clauses of the Shared Education Bill. We will listen carefully to what the Minister and others have to say, and make further contributions as the Bill proceeds at Committee and Further Consideration Stages.

**Mr Lunn:** First, I join others in wishing you well, Mr Speaker, as you attempt to complete the good work that you are involved in in this mandate and, obviously, beyond that, I wish you well for your retirement, whatever you decide to do. I am told that 70 is the new 50. I certainly hope it is, in my case, as well. Good luck to you.

I am going to speak in favour of the Bill. I am saying that at the outset, and I will say it at the end of my contribution because, in between, people might wonder what I meant by that. I am glad that other Members have expressed reservations in various forms about the quality, content and significance of the Bill. As somebody has said, it is a good starting point. It is worthwhile; it is an attempt by the Department to at least clarify what is meant by shared education. I cannot help thinking that the definition that it has come up with is not perfect, and I am glad that I am not the only one to say that.

I enjoyed the Minister's opening remarks. That is not to say that I do not normally enjoy them, but I enjoyed them on this occasion because, for a start, they were mercifully brief, and, apart from that, the content was good to my ears, because, at the beginning of his comments, the Minister highlighted at some length the benefits of children being educated together. He actually could have been talking about the integrated sector. It would have been the same speech. I hope I heard him right on this, because it was quite encouraging to me, but he talked about the word "promote" and its inclusion in the Bill. There is now an obligation on the Department to:

*"encourage, facilitate and promote shared education",*

but only to "facilitate" and "encourage" integrated education. I happen to think that "promote" is a powerful word. If you look at the dictionary definition, you may find that it is the strongest of those three words.

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lunn:** Sure; yes.

**Mr Weir:** I am loath to interrupt the school report that the Member is giving the Minister, but, by way of clarification, the Bill talks about "encourage" rather than "promote". Strictly speaking, it is, I suppose, one of the things on which the Minister made clear there may be a divergence of opinion. It does not place an obligation; it places a power, which is of a different nature.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Chair for that. I was going to mention at some stage the use of the words "power", "duty" and "obligation". I am not sure which is the strongest; I fancy it is "obligation". Perhaps the Minister can clarify that. I also point out that the Minister has recently agreed to conduct a review of the integrated education sector. I look forward to hearing more detail from him on what he has in mind, because the sector would like that review to be independent and not conducted by the Department.

Quite a lot of money has been set aside for this project. My understanding is that quite a lot of money is to be set aside for shared and integrated projects, particularly capital projects. I cannot escape the feeling that it is all directed at the shared education projects at the moment. "Shared" is the buzzword, and that is the direction of travel. That is what worries people who have spent well over 30 years now trying to bring children together through the medium of integrated education, despite the blockages, objections and all the reasons not to honour the Department's obligations in that respect, all of which have held back the development of the sector. Now, we are told that the integrated schools are at the top end of the continuum — that is the word being used — of shared education. In other words, there is an expectation, or perhaps a hope, that all this on shared education will lead to some integration and that schools will get to know each other and begin to realise that integrated education is not something to be feared but perhaps a natural consequence of what they are now embarking on. I hope that that is the case. In, I think, 35 years, the integrated sector has produced only roughly 7% penetration into the entire school population. We will just have to see where this all goes.

We talked about measurable outcomes, which are very important. It is not hard to measure the educational outcomes of a sharing programme. There is either improvement or there is not. I hope that there is. I guess that

the socio-economic and social development outcomes will be a lot more difficult to measure. I hope that, in the timescale that we are talking about, proper measuring devices can be arrived at to ensure that we can see an outcome, because the money will run out. I think that Mrs Overend said that the project is funded until 2018. Beyond that, it will be mainstreamed. Well, let us see in 2018 whether it is worthwhile mainstreaming it. The jury will certainly be out.

The Bill misses an opportunity to consolidate the relationship between shared and integrated education. That is something that we may come back to at Consideration Stage.

I will talk specifically about the wording in the Bill. The definition of "shared education" is the education together of:

*"those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children".*

That will be of interest to a school such as, let us say, Methody. I often refer to Methodist College. For the record again — Robin Newton, an old boy, is looking at me — the composition of Methodist College is roughly 45% Protestant, 25% Catholic and 30% other. What about the others? The others may be Protestants and Catholics who do not chose to define themselves in that way; genuine others who have no belief whatsoever; or, if they are from the immigrant population, they could be Muslim. There is a lot of diversity in our society these days. I would like to see something in there that refers to people who are not Protestant or Catholic.

Just last week, we had a presentation from the Department. I see Faustina and Andrew in the Officials' Box today. It was very interesting presentation on flexibility, which other Members have mentioned. The Chair mentioned the possibility of having some kind of Roman tribune or czar sitting at the top of all this making decisions about which projects will be acceptable and which will not. I am sure that we will not get to that point, but somebody presumably has to make decisions. I hope that there will be a lot of room for flexibility, because it worries me that projects could fall between the stools of "Protestant", "Catholic", "other", "socially deprived" and whatever other criteria come over the horizon. It would be a shame if good projects were not accepted or funded because they did not meet the specific criteria — not enough Catholics, Protestants or socially deprived children involved — even though they were very worthy projects. I hope that we do



not get to that stage, because it would make a nonsense of the whole project.

I will say something positive about the Bill. Clause 1(3)(b) refers to:

*"services of any kind ... which provide educational benefit to children or young persons or which are ancillary to education."*

That is quite important, because it indicates to me that "services" does not have to mean something strictly and directly connected to the curriculum. Mr Rogers mentioned a project on World War One and that kind of thing involving his old school, St Louis Grammar School, and a school in Taunton. That may not be on the curriculum, but it is absolutely vital.

I always come back to this point: what is the thrust of this? Is it meant to be educational benefit? That was my understanding of the original reason for shared education. It still has to be the basic reason for it, but is it also about some kind of belief that it will have a dramatic effect on our children? If it does have that dramatic effect on our children, surely the natural consequence is to bring children together through a properly integrated system and not this constant reference to sharing. I hope that that is the way in which we go, and I hope that people come to realise that through the sharing projects.

Mr Flanagan paid tribute, as he would do, to what goes on in Fermanagh. Fermanagh is a terrific example of what can be achieved. Others mentioned Ballycastle High School and Cross and Passion College. We had a presentation from them, and they do excellent work. It is only a small point, but they told us that their sixth-form bash this year was a joint event for the first time. I do not know what consequences will flow from that, but it is great to see.

We have visited Limavady a couple of times. You cannot fault what is going on there, as it is excellent. Even if you aspire to the concept that schools should be coming together as one rather than being separate and sharing, Limavady is an excellent example of what can be achieved. It is also happening in Londonderry, or Derry, and elsewhere.

I do not want to knock the Bill, but I continually wonder whether the needs and rights of the integrated sector are being honoured, and I would like to hear from the Minister about that. I could cite many examples from down the years of where integrated schools have been held back or turned down. I will make an

exception in your case, Minister, because I believe that you have honestly done your best to respect the obligation during your tenure. Again, I could quote example of that happening.

Beyond that, we will have more to say about the Bill at Consideration Stage, and, I fancy, others will as well. The Bill is not perfect, but what Bill ever has been? It is mercifully short, so we should not have to agonise over it for months. Sometimes, things that are short and sweet are quite complicated, too, but let us see where we go with it.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lunn:** Yes, certainly.

**Mr B McCrea:** I want to ask the Member's opinion about the merit of the Bill being mercifully short. For a topic of this importance, maybe there ought to be a bit more substance to it. I find it strange that the Bill is only one A4 page in length. I wonder whether that is an omission rather than a positive.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Member for that. He is not known for brevity himself, so he may learn something from it. *[Laughter.]*

I do not mind that it is a short Bill. This is the groundwork and first step, as others have said, towards something that will obviously have to be tweaked and amended along the way as we learn from it. I do think that it has merit, so I hope that you will forgive me, Members, for anything I have said that appears to cast doubt on the whole project because I am not intending to be entirely negative about this.

**11.45 am**

**Mr Newton:** Like others, including the Chair, my party colleague, I am generally supportive of the Bill. I think that it is important to recognise where the Bill is coming from, what its genesis was and what its driver is. It is coming from the parties that sit around the Executive table and that develop the Programme for Government.

The Programme for Government placed specific objectives on the Department of Education, and those were determined to be in three areas. The first was to establish a ministerial advisory group to explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister of Education. The second was to ensure that all children had the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015. We may have missed the target of including all children. The third objective was to

substantially increase the number of schools sharing facilities by 2015, and, in welcoming the progress that is being made in that sphere, I can say that some excellent examples have been brought to the Committee as evidence of that. Indeed, the Committee has had the opportunity to go out and look at the practice that is in operation. I do not think that any member of the Committee has not been impressed by what they have heard or what they have seen, appreciating all the difficulties and hurdles that principals and boards of governors have had to get over to make the initiatives work.

Reference was made to this being a small Bill, and I would not use the words "mercifully small". It is small, but it is significant, and it is a significant step in progress in Northern Ireland. If we can get the Bill passed, we will have taken a very positive step forward in education. All the evidence and all of what we have seen has been positive. The visits that we have undertaken as a Committee have been good examples of good practice, and, where projects have emerged, they have involved the essential condition or criteria that local parents, schools and communities have been supportive of them. I think that this is one of the essential ingredients as shared education moves forward.

There are good examples, and Trevor Lunn referred to the long history of Methodist College, or Methody. I am not a former pupil, by the way. I never had the brains to go to Methody.

**Mr Lunn:** They turned you down.

**Mr Newton:** They turned me down.

That long history and ethos, and the good practice that is there, is embedded in that school. There is much good practice in other areas, and Trevor referred to those as good examples. Much of it has been done below the radar, where a song and dance has not been made about it, where press releases have not been issued, and where communities together have got on with each other and have done it and seen the benefits. If we are going down this route, as we are, then I suppose that the ethos and objectives need to be encapsulated in the Bill. Certainly, we need to see an improvement in education standards and all that flows from that for our children and young people and we need to further explore and examine at the next stage how that can be built in, too.

Much can be made of sending a class of A-level pupils to one school or another and sharing facilities. Is that really what we want? No, it is not really what we want, but it is a step forward. Where we have a school with a good reputation in mathematics, science, English, the arts, or whatever it might be, and an adjacent school that is maybe not just as strong in an area, why would we not want the former to share its strengths? Why would we not bring those schools together? Why would we not let that be shared with the pupils in the schools, or the young people in the colleges, for the benefit of their education?

On sharing the skills of our teaching staff, there are teachers who are exemplars and have leadership qualities that are way beyond what might be regarded as the norm. Why would we not allow a wider range of children to experience, or live within, those leadership qualities and gain from the knowledge and enthusiasm that some teachers can impart, beyond what others can do?

Moving forward, in the next five, 10 and 15 years, buildings and resources will be tight and at a premium; so why would we not want to share them where possible. There is a strong economic and educational case for shared education.

I have made the point that communities need to be comfortable with it. I suggest, as others have done, that not every community can move at the same pace and not every community will have the same opportunity, but a start needs to be made and a building block needs to be put in place. If we put that building block in place, I have no doubt that, when the benefits of it are seen, other communities will follow.

There have been a number of examples in the past, one of which was education for mutual understanding. I happen to believe that it was not a great initiative, but it was an initiative nonetheless. I know that Trevor Lunn is very much tied into the integrated education movement, but he recognises that it has not set the education world alight, given that he said that only 7% of the school population is involved in the integrated sector. Parents have not bought into the integrated sector, generally speaking, and pupils are not flocking to it.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank Mr Newton for giving way. I hear what he says, but where we differ is the reason why the integrated sector has not set the world on fire. It is not because of the lack of parental demand or choice, it is because of what I referred to in my speech as the Department's reluctance down the years to

entirely embrace the sector and the obligations that it has towards it. Again, for the record, I have tried to absolve the present Minister of that. The sector has not been given the opportunity to flourish; that is where the problem is.

**Mr Newton:** I am not sure that I can totally agree with what the Member said, but he has shared that view in the Committee and, indeed, in the Chamber on previous occasions.

If we are going to move forward on this, we have to recognise that we have a very good cohort of teaching staff.

They are professional, dedicated and committed to their teaching profession, and shared education gives them an opportunity to share those skills and knowledge with a wider range of pupils.

I have already said that we cannot force the pace of this initiative, but we can indicate to parents and schools what the benefits might be for our children and young people. Where I think there is an essential feature if we are to fully gain the benefits — reference was made to it — is the matter of area planning. I have been greatly disappointed by what I have seen of area planning activities, which were described by one learned gentleman who came to give evidence to the Committee as being a cut-and-paste exercise. Many will agree with that description. If we are to be successful and this Bill is to deliver, we need to have successful, effective and holistic area planning. There needs to be a holistic approach to the planning of our schools estate, not a sectoral approach. It brings benefits to the Minister's budget and releases money to be spent on other things if we have an area plan that works.

This is a good step forward. Further work is needed on the Bill. Other steps need to be put in place for the Bill to work and to deliver in and around our education. Let me finish with the one area in the Bill that gives me great encouragement. It refers to not only dealing with Protestant, Catholic or others. The Bill will help those:

*"who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation",*

and allow them to mix with those who are not experiencing it, and to allow schools to implement initiatives that can ensure that those from a less-well-off background have the opportunities to go to what might be regarded as some of the more elite grammar schools.

That takes us another step forward that can only be of benefit to our schoolchildren, young people and the future of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Kennedy:** Thanks for the opportunity to speak on this brief Bill — and to speak briefly, because much of the ground has already been covered by my colleague Sandra Overend. The Ulster Unionist Party has always given fair wind to the concept of shared education. We applaud the efforts of schools from different sectors to come together to share classes and facilities, whether that is in County Fermanagh or other parts of Northern Ireland, such as Limavady or Ballycastle. There are very good examples of practical cooperation out there, not least in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, and I am certainly aware of those.

As my colleague Mrs Overend explained in her speech, however, the concern is that there is no consensus about what shared education means. We have had some discussion on that and highlighted that even through this debate. In some ways, this short Bill does not take us much further forward in that. We have heard the rhetoric in this Assembly about shared education, but we should remind ourselves that, just a few months ago, in this very Assembly in debates about St Mary's teaching college and its future, Sinn Féin and the SDLP were competing as to who could stand up for the separate Catholic education system. There was no hint there of a shared future in education. It is also a fact that the CCMS continues to criticise integrated education heavily. It is my understanding that no Catholic maintained school has ever transformed into an integrated school. Twenty-five controlled schools have become officially integrated over 25 years.

## 12.00 noon

**Mr Lunn:** Will the Member give way on that?

**Mr Kennedy:** I will give way.

**Mr Lunn:** Just for the record: one Catholic maintained primary school has attempted to become integrated recently, and it is being blocked by the Minister.

**Mr Kennedy:** That confirms concerns that are still out there that, whilst the rhetoric is about shared education, the reality is still some way off. Those facts raise concern about equity.

It seems to me that there has been a complete lack of consistent policy on shared education. The Minister published a shared education

policy three days after he approved yet another amalgamation of three Catholic maintained primary schools. He has approved increases in integrated school enrolments when they will affect controlled schools in places such as Moira and Carrickfergus, but he refuses integrated enrolments when they will affect the maintained sector, certainly in the Omagh area. There is no evidence of shared education there. It may be that Sinn Féin and the DUP are signing up to some shared campuses —

**Mr O'Dowd:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kennedy:** The Minister will have ample opportunity when he makes his winding-up speech, and I am sure that he will take the opportunity. He normally likes to hold forth on his opinions.

It appears that Sinn Féin and the DUP are signing up to some shared campuses with separate schools and, effectively, to a tick-box exercise called "shared education". We need to understand that shared education is more important than that and has to be treated as shared education and not shared-out education. We support shared education if it is part of a process leading to a single-state education system in Northern Ireland that is open to all. As my colleague indicated, this short Bill, as it stands, does not signal a proper or full way forward to obtaining a shared future in education. We will seek to improve it as it continues on its legislative process, and I hope very much that others will be open to the suggestions that we will make.

**Mr McCausland:** The document that we have before us today, the Shared Education Bill, in many ways provides definition, context and a framework, but there is clearly a lot of work still to be done on taking shared education forward. It is certainly the case, as was highlighted by others, that there is a growth of interest in shared education in many areas across the Province and in many schools. This is part of the picture for moving forward, but it is only part.

Benefits will flow from sharing in education. We are faced with a situation in which we are not starting to develop education in Northern Ireland with a clean sheet. There are strongly entrenched interests and rights, and it will take quite a long time to change that, because there is no clear evidence of any desire for change in many sectors. However, benefits flow from shared education, one of which is in community cohesion. The more that we can move forward in creating a shared and better future for

Northern Ireland and for the people who live in Northern Ireland, so much the better. One element of that has to be community cohesion, and one element of building community cohesion is around the better understanding of others and their traditions, background and identity.

The benefits of building a shared and better future are clear. There is also evidence of educational benefits in shared learning, which was put to the Committee.

Our education system reflects the divisions in our society. The Bill will go some way, I hope, to addressing that and ameliorating the disadvantages of such division.

Among the issues going forward is that we need to look at the financial aspect of the Bill. How that is handled will be crucial. There are also practical issues, in that there are differences between sectors that need to be recognised. The definition in the Bill of shared education is:

*"those of different religious belief, including reasonable numbers of both Protestant and Roman Catholic children or young persons".*

Most children from the Roman Catholic community attend a Roman Catholic maintained school, and most children from the Protestant community attend a controlled school. The Bill defines the bringing together of children in terms of religious belief, but religious belief has some correlation with political belief and some with cultural identity.

If children are coming together from different backgrounds and sectors, it is important that they do so on the basis of equity and cultural confidence. That is a question that I put repeatedly over a number of Committee sessions to the academic experts who were giving evidence. It always reminds me of Pierre Trudeau's comment on the relationship between Canada and America, when he said that living in Canada was a bit like being in bed "with an elephant." If people are coming together in anything, and it is to be genuinely shared, it is important that they come together on the basis of equity in the cultural confidence, awareness and competence of the children. When we questioned those who gave evidence to the Education Committee, some got it as an issue and some did not. That troubled me because, if there are folk in the education establishment who do not get it, that does not augur well.

I have emphasised time and again that, educationally, in being right for the child and in terms of the rights of the child, every child should have the opportunity in school to embrace, and have a greater awareness and better understanding of, the culture of the community from which they come. It is part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and a hugely important right, that the identity of the home and community from which a child comes — a child's cultural identity — is embraced, validated and affirmed in their school.

That certainly happens in Irish-medium schools, which are fundamentally based around language, culture and identity. It also happens to a large extent in the maintained sector. I remember an article by renowned columnist Jude Collins in the now defunct — thankfully — 'Daily Ireland', in which he said that we needed to fight for the preservation of CCMS and Roman Catholic schools, even for those who were not practising or devout Catholics, because they affirmed an Irish identity, taught Irish culture and helped children to see the world through Irish eyes. That was his perception, and I thought that, as an educationalist, he probably did know something about the subject. Who was I to disagree on that matter and in that area with Mr Collins?

In the same way, children coming from the controlled sector need to go into any sharing, shared or inclusive situation on the basis that their school has validated, affirmed and embraced their culture. It is a rights issue. It is an issue that arises in the context of shared education. It is many years indeed since I went through teacher training, but we were told in those days about the Bullock report on education. The Bullock report said that one of the contributors to a successful education was bringing the culture and language of the community into the school. Educationally, it is right. It is right in the context of shared education, and it is also the right of the child. I raise it today in this context merely because I want to take every opportunity to raise it so that those who are not so aware of the issue at the moment will become more aware of it within the cultural establishment and seek to play their part.

I am delighted that the Bill includes a reference to the Youth Council for Northern Ireland. That may have some relevance to the future existence or otherwise of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland. I do not know the Minister's thinking in that regard, but it is certainly specified in the Bill as one of the contributors. That is important, because what happens

outside the school in the youth context is just as important as what happens within the school setting. CCEA also has an important role here. That relates to the point that I have been making about the cultural education of the children.

I am sure that there is a lot more work to be done on the Bill. There is a lot more work to be done in developing a common understanding of shared education, where it leads and where it is going. However, it does recognise that, for many people in Northern Ireland, there is not a desire at this point to have a fully integrated system, but they would be comfortable with something of an incremental nature such as this facilitates. In many difficult issues, an incremental approach is best. It has to be one with which local communities are comfortable.

**Mr Allister:** My experience of my constituents is that their aspiration and primary interest in respect of their children is that they can obtain for them the best available education. Many do not nuance it much beyond that reality. I do not find that that is trumped by any aspiration towards social engineering, yet much that the Department brings forth seems to fit within the category of social engineering. Last night, I again chaired my local primary school's board of governors. The message that was coming through to me on a multiplicity of educational issues from parents, representatives and others was simply, "We want the best for our kids. We want a school that delivers. We want a school that passes them into a post-primary system that maximises their talents. We are not particularly interested in ticking social-engineering boxes. We are interested in achievement for our kids."

I must say that I fear that some of what should be the foundational and overarching objective in education of that nature is being lost. I also detect in the context of this proposal the hand of those who, of course, are determined to rewrite the educational charter in Northern Ireland. We had another exposition of it from the Minister last week. He is determined, if he can, to write grammar schools out of it and to write selection out of it. This seems to dovetail with that, almost to the point of being a Trojan facilitator of it.

Let me say that I have no difficulties whatsoever, where it is pragmatic and sensible, with two, three or more schools sharing a new science lab or whatever to better all in that school community.

There is no sensible or practical objection to that.

12.15 pm

**Mr McNarry:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mr McNarry:** Does the Member agree that, perhaps within this multicoloured vision, what we are heading towards is multi-developed sites, campuses of 2,000 or 2,500 pupils, brought there, as the Member says, in some form of social engineering? In what he is saying, could the Member address the House on how we might escape from that, in terms of coming back to what his constituency wants, which is very similar to what my constituents are saying on the matter?

**Mr Allister:** I think that, under the aegis of this Bill, we are not going to escape from that. The Bill requires the Education Authority, by virtue of the definition it gives, to activate the statutory obligation on it under section 2 of the 2014 Act:

*"to encourage, facilitate and promote shared education."*

Of course, it does this in respect of integrated education, and we know what that means: preferential funding. It does it in respect of the Irish-medium sector, and we know what that means: preferential funding. Now, it is to do that in respect of what is termed "shared education", so we know what that will mean: preferential funding. Preferential funding, as experienced, as applied to the integrated and the Irish-medium sectors, has meant a dearth of funding for the controlled sector and, at times, the maintained sector. So, we can see where this is going.

I think that the experience of large campuses is not perhaps working out as all the promise packaged in them said it would. I hear rumblings from Omagh Academy about how it feels it is being squeezed and its identity lost. That which was promised to the school is, in fact, being repressed. So, I think there is, within the Bill, an element of social engineering and politicising of education, even more than it already is. I detect within the Bill the very distinct anti-grammar school and anti-selection agenda of the Minister.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** In a moment.

Those who are signing up for this seem to include people who have painted themselves as the saviours of grammar schools and selection.

This is almost going to create a new elitism, the triumph of Marxist philosophy. That is really what is being ensconced in clause 1 of the Bill, in the definition. This is the Minister's prime argument, as I understand it, for he is anti-selection and he takes an anti-grammar school stance. For all the reasons of political correctness, we are going to tick the sectarian box and then tick the box so that all, from whatever background, might have, enjoy and attain — irrespective of the fact that it is a conglomeration of different talents — the same opportunities and achievements. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is absolute folly to think that all kids are equal in their academic or non-academic abilities. This idea of the second part of the definition:

*"those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not",*

has now, suddenly, become a prioritised, funded objective of shared education. It is an ill-disguised attack on what, in the Minister's definition, grammar school education and selection represent. It is an ill-disguised attack on those concepts. So I have no difficulty in identifying what I perceive to be the political agenda driving this.

I make the point again: you do not need this sort of legislation to enable the pragmatic, practical, sensible cooperation that you might see in any one town. You only need this gloss and this element of definition if, in fact, your motivation is to build a Trojan Horse in support of an anti-selection, anti-grammar school agenda.

I think that I was due to give way first to Mr McCrea.

**Mr B McCrea:** You are very kind, Mr Allister. Actually, you have gone on to develop the theme; I was not sure that you were going to. As Mr Allister was aware, I highlighted clause 1(2)(b):

*"those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not"*

It seems to me that this is the central point of the Bill. This is indeed a Trojan Horse; an attack on existing structures and an attempt to bring in comprehensive education by an alternative route. The Member carried on and dealt with the matter, but I find it strange, and I ask him whether he also finds it strange, that

the point has not been raised by any of the major parties heretofore?

**Mr Allister:** The Member puts it well and articulates what I myself feel about this. This is a scarcely concealed assault on the existing educational establishment for the purpose of peddling and promoting the comprehensive agenda — which, of course, other parts of the United Kingdom are retreating from at a great rate of knots. That is exactly what is afoot here, and I identify and empathise with that point.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for giving way. I share in the belief that parents around Northern Ireland see educational improvement as the main objective. Wanting to link in with educational attainment is important, but I have to say that I am somewhat amazed by the leaps that the Member has made. He uses a Trojan Horse analogy. I and the Minister take very different views of selection. This is not some sort of Trojan Horse for comprehensive education or the destruction of the grammars. Rather, if one is to use an analogy, the Member is in the role of Don Quixote tilting at fantasy windmills. Shared education can be of educational benefit: cooperation can lead to dealing with issues of social and educational deprivation and educational underachievement. However, the kind of fantasy problems seen by the Member in the legislation are wide of the mark. He is peddling a completely false premise and completely false fears.

**Mr Allister:** With respect, the DUP Chief Whip is the last person to give lectures on fantasy windmills because, of course, it was the DUP that bought into Government in 2007 on a number of premises, each of which has now been shown to have been utterly false. They now discover that the party that they are sitting in Government with is controlled by a body that they said had been disbanded with the decommissioning of all weapons. Now they find that is not so —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Member to return immediately to the issue before us. We are well off the topic.

**Mr Allister:** I suppose that I am. *[Laughter.]* I was making the point that the credentials of the Member in making a judgement of when and where there are Trojan Horses are perhaps a little suspect.

You cannot analyse the Bill without the conclusion. Ask yourself the simple question: does the process outlined, along with the statutory duty in last year's Bill, advance

comprehensive education or the alternative? I think that any fair-minded person would come to the conclusion that the primary beneficiaries will be those who build their philosophy on the words of clause 1(2)(b) by bringing together:

*"those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not",*

thereby comprehensivising all of the educational system.

That is, patently and obviously, what it is about. There are those who, by dint of the political agreements that they are required to make to keep themselves in office, have strained at many a gnat, but here is another camel that they are quite prepared to swallow. The DUP has swallowed this camel. It will still wear a badge that says that the party is for grammar schools or for selection, but its Members will troop through the Lobbies to endorse the very philosophy that undermines the —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** No. Judging by his previous contribution, I do not think that there is a lot of merit in giving way to the Member, although I normally do, as he knows.

I think that there is a bit of discomfort among them, and so there should be, and if I can add to that discomfort by shining the torch of truth on to what is really going on, not for the first time I am happy to do so.

I will finish where I started: education should be about outcomes and improvements. It should not be about ticking fashionable boxes, and doing so in such a way that it financially disadvantages others whose cause some still claim to endorse. I have no interest in the social engineering that I detect in the Bill. Therefore, I think that the Bill is of the nature that I have described.

Mr Speaker, I am normally fairly diligent about staying on to listen to the entirety of a debate, but I have an arrangement that I have to fulfil. I hope to be back in time to hear the Minister's reply, but I apologise to succeeding contributors if I am not here when they speak.

**Mr B McCrea:** The Bill is an assault on the existing education structures. It is certainly an assault on integrated education. There are some who started their contribution by saying that it is "mercifully short". We must therefore take the opportunity to look at why the Bill has

been introduced at all. What is the purpose of introducing a "mercifully short" Bill?

Mr Allister indicated that he may have to go. Before he does, I will deal with his issues. He was challenged by the Chief Whip of the DUP across the Chamber, and whether the Chief Whip of the DUP wants to take on Mr Allister or me, the argument will be the same. Clause 1(2)(b) states:

*"those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation and those who are not".*

This is a Trojan Horse. It is an attempt to put finance where finance was not before. Given that we are dealing in a fixed sum of money, taking money from one source to give preference to the other will mean the demise of the financial contribution.

There may well be people here who tut-tut. When the great mantra of Don Quixote is brought up, I always know that a nerve has been touched, as it alludes to the fact that someone is mad to be suggesting the point that he or she is making. Well, in looking through the Bill, I see relatively few things to discuss other than these issues. It is not being a Don Quixote to point out the fallacy in the argument that is being put forward.

In a speech made by Mr Kennedy — I am sure that the words that I am about to say will cause him a little concern — I agreed with what he had to say, almost in its entirety. I realise that that may be something of a shock and we may have to revisit the issue, but he said that this short Bill does not take us very far. He said, in relation to the argument about Stranmillis and St Mary's, that, if people were genuine in their approach to shared education, they might have adopted a different position on that.

### 12.30 pm

Others have made contributions about integrated education and the fact that only 7% of the population are involved in integrated education. The reason for that is that the numbers in integrated schools are capped, so those who wish to change to some form of integrated education are prevented from doing so. If you look through successive polls, you will see that there is willingness to change.

Some say that the Bill is a stepping stone. My problem with stepping stones is that they are all very well when you are dealing with shallow water and can get from one side to the other,

but a stepping stone that leads you into a deep-water channel brings you nowhere but to destruction. We need not to put in place stepping stones but to build bridges.

I do not necessarily need to have an integrated structure per se. I am happy to have other forms of education. It is time for another uncomfortable truth: I noted when Nelson McCausland was talking that he and I went to Belfast Royal Academy, as did Mr Lunn — we may have to have some form of reunion. That school has a very mixed intake. It is a grammar school that brings in people from all backgrounds and tries to reach, on the basis of merit, those who want an academic education. I do not want that school to have to change its position because it does not provide strictly integrated education, but, believe me, it is integrated education nonetheless.

If you want to know where I think that we should be strategically in 20 to 25 years' time — those of you who are interested in a lot of stepping stones — I think that our children should be freely educated together. They should be in a structure in which they can be educated on the basis of and where they are provided with services that they want to receive. I agree with Mr Allister that what really influences most parents is that they want quality education for their children. When I look at the Bill — Trojan Horse/Don Quixote — I see a really strange Bill. I just do not understand why such a modest proposal has been put forward.

There is a strategic issue. The fundamental fault line in our society, the Assembly and our political processes is the idea of maintaining Catholic, Protestant and separate. That is the issue that we have to resolve, and, simply put, this form of delivery will take too long. It will be hijacked for alternative strategies that have nothing to do with what is in the Bill.

Almost half of our children are taught in schools in which 95% or more of pupils are of the same religion. Only 7% attend integrated schools. It was suggested in the Committee that this shows the failure of integrated education, yet what I pick up from successive opinion polls — maybe others will have different information — is that the public at large want greater integration and an end to segregation.

There was a poll by LucidTalk in 2013. I know that there are others, but these are the figures that I happen to have. In that poll, 66% said that they believed that integrated schools should be the main model for our education system; 68% said that they believed that integrated schools are the best settings to



prepare children for living and working in an increasingly diverse society; and 79% said that they would support a request to transform the school that their children attend to an integrated school.

You go back to how our friends try to help us. Speaking in the Waterfront Hall in July 2013, no less a figure than President Obama said:

*"If towns remain divided — if Catholics have their schools and buildings, and Protestants have theirs — if we can't see ourselves in one another, if fear or resentment are allowed to harden, that encourages division. It discourages cooperation."*

I am sure that other Members will deal with it, but, as far back as 2010, the First Minister, Peter Robinson, described Northern Ireland's education system as being a "benign form of apartheid".

The Good Friday Agreement — the Belfast Agreement — contains a specific pledge to:

*"facilitate and encourage integrated education and mixed housing",*

as an essential element in the process of reconciliation and the creation of a culture of tolerance at every level of society. The Bill attempts to change that balance. It attempts to put shared education on a similar level as integrated education and, in the fullness of time, it will subsume that obligation. This is a change of political priorities, and it should not go unremarked.

There are people here who talk about shared education, who believe that it is in some way the same or analogous to integrated education. There are people who say the words, but they do not really mean them. It is a tick-box exercise. The principal of Enniskillen Integrated Primary School, Adele Kerr, was dismayed when Arlene Foster made comments about her school when Obama and Cameron came to see it. She said that it was:

*"a blatant attempt to sabotage this historical day".*

She said that Mrs Foster's comment was "insulting" and:

*"If Mrs Foster visited our school which she has never done, despite me telling her the door is always open, she would know why we were chosen for our visit."*

We should not speak with weasel words. We should not pretend to be one thing and do another. We have to tackle the integration of our children if we want to have a future in this place.

I am coming to the end of my contribution. In its recent report on shared and integrated education, which it presented in September, the Committee for Education was spectacularly dismissive of integrated education. It stated:

*"Given the relatively limited uptake of Integrated Education and the very different views expressed by sectoral bodies in respect of its facilitation, encouragement and definition, the Committee agreed that the Department should undertake a strategic review of its approach and relevant actions to date relating to Integrated Education."*

I was not on that Committee, though I have been in the past. I resile from that point of view. I do not think that it is the right way forward. I do not think that we should abandon integrated education nor try to supplant it with something different. The Bill, in its points, pays lip service to integration and, in the process, attempts to introduce a legislative framework that will allow the Minister of the day to produce finance for his own particular interests.

This is not the right way forward, and that is why the Bill is extremely dangerous. For those who say that they will give it a fair wind and have a look at it in the Committee, it is a Bill that is on two sides of A4 paper with no real clauses or information. What are you going to do at Committee Stage? Are you going to introduce 100 amendments? Are you going to get agreements on those amendments? Or, are you going to push through something that lets the Minister of the day do whatever he likes? Members on the Benches opposite have a responsibility to stand up and fight for the education system in this part of the world because it is a good system. Of course there are areas that we need to address, but the issue is that doing it on one page of A4 is not the right way forward.

I intend to return to that after Committee Stage. This should not go through on the nod. Those Members sitting opposite really need to have a look at the Bill and see if they truly agree with it.

**Mr Speaker:** I just point out, John, that the Business Committee has agreed to meet at 1.00 pm. I do not know how long you intend to take with your contribution.

**Mr McCallister:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I hope to finish at 1.00 pm or possibly before it.

In opening my contribution to the debate, I will say that I welcome the Bill in the context that I proposed the amendments that put it in the Bill that established the Education Authority. I suppose there are several options that we could look at that people have produced around education and where we may go on these things. Some say that we should go to a single education system. That is fine because no doubt that would be a secular education system. Dare I say that to go down that road, with a comprehensive-style system, would be much more of a Trojan Horse. It would also be much more limiting to parental choice. It would fly in the face of what I would like to see.

I agree with one point made by Mr Allister, which was that educational outcomes should be the main objective of this. However, by sharing, you hope to give access to the best schools and the best teachers and to broaden the curriculum. That is what you want to do. I hope that the Minister's policy and aspirations for the Bill are about that: extending choice and giving kids from various backgrounds the opportunity to share and have a curriculum that they would not otherwise be able to take advantage of. That is the essence of the Bill and, for me, its importance.

I give the Minister notice that I may think of amending the Bill when it comes back from Committee Stage. Of course there are things that I want included. However, the Bill is not a Trojan Horse for some sort of all-embracing comprehensive system. It cannot be. The very definition of having to share means that you must have different systems and sectors. It may be desirable to go to a single education system, if you want a very much one-size-fits-all approach to education. I think that Mr Flanagan said, at the start of the debate, that this may not be where you would start if you had a blank canvas, but we are where we are in education terms.

**Mr Weir:** I thank the Member for giving way. As has been indicated, there are different views around the Chamber on comprehensive education and academic selection, and those are well trodden. However, the Bill is essentially silent on that. There has been a slight element of educational McCarthyism that sees reds under every bed and some sort of subliminal Marxist agenda — the Minister may well have an overt Marxist agenda — but this is about sharing between sectors. I really fail to see where the difficulty is with trying to share, particularly between those who are in socio-

economic deprivation and those who are not. I am not quite sure how this is some amazing pathway to comprehensive education or, as some would have it, some reinforcement of the current system.

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful to Mr Weir for that, and I agree with his point. It has long been established that we have a huge job to do in our education system, especially to deal with the huge failing in Protestant working-class areas and across the board in all working-class areas where our education system is not delivering.

## 12.45 pm

The Member knows my views on creating social mobility and, of course, education is one of the greatest assets we can give people. One of the greatest advantages we can give our young people to get them economically active is a proper and decent education. That way, they get a start in life and do not get trapped on welfare. It ties in with so much of our policy agenda, and it is crucial that we get it right. So, I do not fear giving people from poorer backgrounds some advantages through access to better schools, widening the curriculum choice and sharing what we need to share. There is no Trojan Horse here.

My commitment is the same as that of many others, namely to have grammar schools that perform very well. I would also like to see us using other models in which schools can specialise. Mr Allister quite rightly mentioned that in England they are retreating from some of the comprehensive models, but they are looking at specialist schools. Could we have other schools — vocational schools — that specialise, whether it is in sport or music, and lift the standard?

You have various models that advocate totally integrated schools. That is much more of a worry and much more of a Trojan Horse towards a one-size-fits-all model. The people who argue for it may want to create some sort of beige-coloured society where we are all the same and of the one ability. That is not life. Diversity and pluralism make up our community in Northern Ireland, and we should celebrate that because it enriches all our society, right across not only to Northern Ireland but the entire United Kingdom and indeed the British Isles. Diversity enhances and enriches our lives, and we should cherish it.

It is also a great vehicle for providing parental choice, where parents can choose the model of

education they would like to have. To those who say that we should go entirely integrated and secular in education, I say, "You are limiting parental choice by doing that." You are also trying to pretend that the Catholic Church, the CCMS or the Transferor Representatives' Council should be out of existence. That is not where we are. That view also denies the fact that faith-ethos education outperforms other types of education. If we look at the list of the best performing schools, Catholic grammar schools are amongst the best and I think that the top 10 non-selective secondary schools are all in the maintained sector. What are they doing and giving in that ethos-based education that other schools need to replicate? We should be sharing and lifting all boats in a rising tide. That is what we need to do.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the Bill provides a real opportunity for the grammar schools, which so many here support, as do I, to share some of their expertise and experience and demonstrate generosity and, perhaps, community responsibility by reaching out to other schools that are not quite so successful? That may be a problem as regards the criteria in the Bill on different sectors, but there is a real opportunity for a trickle-down experience and, as you said, to lift all boats.

**Mr McCallister:** I agree with Mr Lunn that there is an opportunity. If some of the criteria need to be changed, then that is what the Committee Stage and Consideration Stage are for.

I am quite sure that Members, the Committee and the Chair will want to work with the Minister, and I am sure that the Minister will be keen to engage.

The big challenge for CCMS and the Catholic Church is how they open up those schools to others. As Mr Lunn said, how do we use that expertise, knowledge and ethos? How do we share it and help to raise standards across our school system? The societal benefits that flow from that are of great benefit to us, but education is the key priority. If we get that, the challenge that I put down to, broadly, the Catholic Church and the maintained sector is this: how do you make your schools more receptive to people from other faiths and none? We have models, and we do not have to look that far to other parts of our country. Some Church of England and Roman Catholic schools in England are even setting targets for admissions of 25% to 30% from other faiths or no faith. Why are parents in other parts of the

country choosing that? It is because the standards are there.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I listened intently to what he said about educational attainment in working-class areas. I recently spoke at the opening of an extension to a primary school in my constituency of North Belfast: Springfield. I made the point to those gathered that parents valuing education is a key element of raising the educational attainment that we are talking about, particularly in working-class areas of north and west Belfast. The issues that face young Catholics in Ardoyne are very similar to those that face young Protestants in Woodvale just across the Crumlin Road, where I live.

**Mr McCallister:** I absolutely accept that point. Not only do you have generational dependency on welfare and benefits but you need to give an education to help to get people out of that poverty trap. This is why, in the past, I have been critical of some of the Minister's cuts to early intervention. All that stuff contributes dramatically to improving outcomes for our children and their eventual participation in the wider economy. It is absolutely critical, and the point is well made as to how we would do that and actually start to share.

The big challenge, of course, is to those in the Catholic maintained sector who want, as I do, to maintain a faith/ethos education. They do not want a secular education and want to maintain their ethos. It is about how you open it up. How do you get a much more diverse intake into a school? You will have to look at diversity on your boards of governors. You will also have to look at diversity in your teaching staff and the barriers that they face. Mrs Overend mentioned the barriers for teaching staff. All those things can make a huge contribution in how you tackle genuine sharing.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member acknowledge that there are many schools with a faith-based ethos? I am thinking particularly of the likes of St Columbanus' College in Bangor. While it is a Catholic school, it has a large mix from right across the community. We really need to work on that to ensure that there is a better spread throughout our schools.

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful, as always, to Mr Rogers for that point. We have some brilliant examples, whether St Columbanus' College in Bangor, Methody in Belfast or Dominican College up in Portstewart. I think that Mr Lunn mentioned Cross and Passion College in

Ballycastle. Sadly, however, as the figures suggest, we remain in the mid- to high 90s in percentage terms of those of us who are being educated in schools that have the same religious or community background as ourselves. We have some brilliant examples for the Minister to model on and to look at how we do that around Northern Ireland. I applaud those schools for doing it. I like that model because it is organic and natural, and it is happening without forcibly bringing people together. That is something to be welcomed.

However, you come back to the big challenges: what are the barriers to truly sharing and to having those models that Mr Rogers talked about in Bangor, Portstewart or Belfast? I suggest that in some areas, it is the diversity of the teaching staff, the diversity of the intake, making sure that people from a different faith, or no faith, feel welcome and can get the benefits of the pastoral care that is very recognisable in some of those schools, and making sure that they get all of the educational advantages. How do we get all of that in? How do we open up those schools and, effectively, free them and many of our parents into feeling that they can look at schools from a different community background as a realistic option to send their children to? We will know that we have started to make a difference on this when we have achieved that.

Yes, of course, like every piece of legislation, the Bill will need amendments and changes to be made and will demand that. That is why I welcome the Minister's bringing the Bill. I also welcome the fact that he has not moved on accelerated passage and that the Bill will go through the scrutiny stage. I agree with and applaud the overall objectives of what I believe is his policy intent. It should be focused on the educational outcomes, widening choice, extending the curriculum, using our education system to truly lift all boats and get aspiration back into all communities and using education to deliver that and to deliver on skills, the economy and releasing people from the poverty trap and the trap of welfare. I welcome the Bill, and I welcome the societal benefits that I very much hope will flow from it, if it is successfully passed and implemented. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

*The debate stood suspended.*

## Assembly Business

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. 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.

Before I suspend the sitting, I wish to advise the House that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will respond to Mr Jim Allister's question for urgent oral answer immediately after the private Members' motion on funding for transport infrastructure. I have also been advised that Mrs Overend is not in a position to move the Adjournment debate today, so a revised indicative timings of the order of business has been issued.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.57 pm.*

*On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —*

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Enterprise, Trade and Investment

#### Brexit: Local Impact

1. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the impact that the EU referendum will have on the local economy. (AQO 9041/11-16)

**Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** I have an opportunity to wish you well, Mr Speaker, after your announcement this morning.

My Department became aware of an existing research study by Oxford Economics that was seeking UK-wide funding to examine the potential impacts of a UK exit from the EU under a selection of plausible scenarios. We have now accepted a proposal from Oxford Economics to join its UK study and to have its work extended to Northern Ireland following a formal approach that we made to it during October.

**Mr McKinney:** I thank the Minister. While the Oxford Economics approach is welcome, given the scale of EU assistance to Northern Ireland in agriculture, infrastructure, Peace and innovation, does the Minister agree that the Northern Irish economy would continue to experience a net benefit from remaining in the EU?

**Mr Bell:** The Oxford Economics research study proposes to examine a range of the potential scenarios, not just a simple in/out scenario. The study we have commissioned will look at, for example, the Norwegian option, which is to leave the European Union but become a member of the European economic area; the Swiss option, which is a new settlement as a product of continued bilateral negotiation; the Turkish option whereby the UK would enter into a customs union with the European Union similar to the current arrangements adopted by Turkey; and also complete withdrawal involving a complete repatriation of powers, with the UK's EU trading relationship determined according to the work of the World Trade Organization's most-favoured-nation criteria. We will look at all the specific impacts of these potential exit scenarios in Northern Ireland across issues such as GDP, sector output, trade volume, household spending and unemployment.

**Mr Lyons:** Will the Minister tell us the terms of reference that have been agreed between the Department and the Oxford Economics research group?

**Mr Bell:** We have set them specifically to look at what I have explained; the different options available and the potential impact those will have across the whole range of scenarios. We have to look very seriously at the implications of being in and being out. If we are to be in, then what potential benefits will there be, and, if we are to be out, what pitfalls will there be and what potential successes could we have, such as free-trade agreements and specific economic zones with areas where we currently do not have them. Let us take all the research and consider it in the round, looking specifically at a range of metrics; GDP, output by sector, trade volume, household spending, employment and unemployment. Comparisons will be made throughout the United Kingdom as a whole. The short paper exercise and access to a database detailing the results are expected to be available to us by the end of this financial year.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. I note that there is no firm opinion from him on what his or his party's view is on our future position within Europe. Will he give us an indication of whether he would be willing to support the call for any decision on a referendum here to be binding, so that if the majority of people here vote to stay within the European Union, that is what should happen?

**Mr Bell:** As we are part of the United Kingdom then, legally, we will be part of the United Kingdom when taking part in the United Kingdom referendum. It is the "United Kingdom referendum": the clue is in the title.

**Mr Allister:** Does the Minister agree that it would be liberating for this trading nation, the United Kingdom, to be freed, in consequence of leaving the EU, of the shackles of bureaucracy on our economy and that it would be liberating with regard to the growth markets which are outside the EU in that we would have the free facility to make our own trade agreements where there is growth rather than be tied to the moribund EU economy, which is now down to less than 20% of the world's GDP?

**Mr Bell:** All that will need to be considered in the round. Members have asked me about the DUP's position, and I stand fully behind what Diane Dodds has done. I am not, however, answering questions as a DUP Minister; I am answering questions as the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister. We have to take a number of issues into account. There are particular advantages in being part of a market of 500 million people. We have to look at the scenarios that I outlined to see what the benefits are, what brings in the most GDP and employment and what represents the best value for United Kingdom citizens.

We also need to consider the scenarios that the honourable Member pointed out — very well, I have to add — of the potential, should we leave the European Union and look towards what we can do with free trade in some of the world's emerging markets. The honourable Member made those points well; I suppose that we trained you well when you were a DUP MEP.

**Ms Sugden:** I am glad to hear that the Minister acknowledges the pitfalls of being in and out. Given that farming underpins our economy, has he met any farming groups to discuss the impact of a Brexit on that industry?

**Mr Bell:** I have met a number of farming groups on a range of issues. We have to look, for example, towards the common agricultural policy, but we also need expert opinion on what would be available to Northern Ireland farmers if we were not paying money into the European Union. What scenarios could there be? I understand that the agrifood sector is a key beneficiary of EU membership as a trading partner and as the result of direct funding from the sector. I also acknowledge that we exported over £1.1 billion in sales to the European Union, although the exact impact on

those sales, according to research, depends on the terms that the UK Government would negotiate with the European Union on the movement of goods and services.

The UK, including Northern Ireland, would face a departure from the common agricultural policy and its related subsidies and regulations. I know that many local farmers rely on the single farm payment in order to be viable, but we also need to look at the money that would be available for them were we to be out.

## Job Creation

2. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how he plans to create jobs over the next five years. (AQO 9042/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** The Executive's economic strategy sets out an overarching goal to 2030 to improve the economic competitiveness of the economy through a focus on export-led economic growth, and this will remain our priority going forward. Our most important exporting sector is manufacturing, and, despite the recent bad news about Michelin, the manufacturing sector has been posting strong growth in output and has created over 1,800 jobs in the past year to March 2015. It is interesting to note that the manufacturing sector is outperforming the UK average.

As we look to refocus the economic strategy, we will continue to invest in the key drivers of innovation, research and development and skills in order to create the conditions that will allow businesses in all sectors to grow and prosper. That is how we will contribute to the Executive's collective goal of delivering economic growth, increasing prosperity and creating jobs.

**Lord Morrow:** I thank the Minister for his response. Having listened to it, I suspect that he will agree that manufacturing jobs are the future. He outlined that some 1,800 jobs have been created in the manufacturing sector over the past year or thereabouts. What is his target for the next five years, particularly in the manufacturing sector?

**Mr Bell:** Manufacturing is a vital sector, accounting for 14% of all local economic output. It accounts for one in every nine of our local jobs. Despite the bad news, the output was 3.2% over the year to quarter 2 in 2015, which outperformed the UK average. The latest DETI research on the cost of doing business showed that we are competitive on all costs against the

rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland but that we cannot compete globally on cost alone.

I am targeting trying to compete for higher-end jobs that require high skills. That is where our competitive edge lies. That is why I am looking to life sciences, agrifood, advanced materials and advanced engineering. I note the success of the Member's constituency in accounting for some 21% of all jobs in manufacturing.

**Mr Lynch:** Does the Minister accept that regional targets need to form part of Invest NI's corporate plan and the Programme for Government going forward?

**Mr Bell:** We have to be careful. All of us want jobs to come to our constituency, and that is natural. I want jobs for Strangford as much as you want them for anywhere else. However, we have to be careful and look at the evidence from the last census: 40% of the people working in all constituencies work in areas outside the parliamentary boundary that they live within. We have to be very careful because we cannot instruct businesses where to go. Businesses will determine that on that on the basis of whatever factors are in their criteria. We will seek to put the best-case scenario right across Northern Ireland to attract jobs because we are conscious that nearly half of our people work outside their parliamentary boundary.

**Mr Speaker:** My apologies, Mr McGlone. I should have called you as the Chair first. Please accept my apology.

**Mr McGlone:** Tá tú ceart go leor. You are all right. Agus mo bhuíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. Thanks very much to the Minister as well.

Much has been made, Minister, by the manufacturing sector of the need for a more strategic approach and the development of a manufacturing strategy. Has the Minister deliberated on a stakeholder-type approach involving manufacturers, the social and trade union sector and his Department in order to develop a more contemporary manufacturing strategy?

**Mr Bell:** The manufacturing strategy that the five parties, including the Member's, came to was the economic strategy, and DETI's manufacturing strategy is within that. I have met unions, and I have tried to take forward some of their ideas. They have asked me specifically to do things around energy costs, and I think that everyone in the House knows

what we did, particularly in relation to Bombardier, our biggest manufacturer.

Sadly, we will never see the truth. I was ready to sign off a three quarters of a million pounds grant investment to Michelin to try to bring its energy costs down. I can work with trade unions on some things; I do not think that other things that they have asked me to do, like appointing additional junior Ministers, would be acceptable to the House. We will work together to support them in the way they are and to continue their growth.

**Mr Speaker:** I inform Members that question 9 has been withdrawn.

### **Chinese Government: Ministerial Engagement**

3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what engagement he has had with the Chinese Government in his capacity as Minister. (AQO 9043/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** In June this year, I met Madam Wang Ling, the vice governor of Hubei province in China during her visit to Northern Ireland. The meeting related specifically to our agrifood sector, and I was there with some of our major companies, including Moy Park.

At the beginning of July, I met Madam Wang Shuying, consul general of the People's Republic of China when we addressed the China Healthcare and Life Sciences Roadshow in Riddel Hall at Stranmillis. That was an important initiative taken forward by United Kingdom trade and industry on how we can develop health and life sciences.

Last month, I attended the UK-China business summit at the Mansion House in London, after which a dinner was hosted by the Lord Mayor and President Xi. At that economic summit, the value to the United Kingdom of up to £40 billion of investment was outlined by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, and by President Xi Jinping.

**Mr Cree:** Minister, welcome back. You have been quoted as saying that we are now in what is being labelled the "golden age" in UK-China relations. Can you explain to us exactly why you say that, how it is "golden", particularly with respect to Northern Ireland, and when we may see direct benefits in Northern Ireland from China?

2.15 pm

While I appreciate your attributing the quotation to me, I was repeating what the Prime Minister, David Cameron, said when he talked about the "golden age" of UK-China relations and the development of the new Silk Road. The Chancellor very wisely said that he wants the United Kingdom to be the European choice of investment for the Chinese Government. There are trillions available, in their foreign exchange and how they invest it, and we want to bring that to Northern Ireland.

Six years ago, Northern Ireland was exporting in the region of £60 million to China. Figures for the last period show that we have raised that to £95.5 million. It is my intention and target to take our exports to China over £100 million by the next period of office.

**Mr Anderson:** I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Can he tell us what potential he sees for the Confucius Institute in Northern Ireland? How does he see that relationship growing?

**Mr Bell:** It is a valuable relationship for Northern Ireland. All the work through Ulster University in the Confucius classrooms is funded through the UK Hanban Institute. I would like to thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for their support in helping us to bring that together; Dolores Kelly who, as chair of the all-party group on China and as Chair of the Employment and Learning Committee in that period, helped us to get the initiative off the ground; and Danny Kennedy who, as Minister at the time, supported it. There was also very valuable input from Anna Lo.

What we need to realise is that, according to Goldman Sachs, China will become the world's largest economy somewhere in the 2020s. We have a unique opportunity to work alongside to attract investment to Northern Ireland from what is the world's largest trading economy and which is about to become the world's largest economy.

I am delighted that from the convent school in Omagh to Bangor Academy in my area, to Millburn Primary School in Coleraine, to South West College in Fermanagh, 1,500 of our young people have successfully passed their first qualification in Mandarin this year.

**Mr Dallat:** I thank the Minister for his answers. I freely acknowledge that he is deeply committed to human rights and religious freedom. Can he tell the House on how many

occasions he raised those issues with the Chinese Government?

**Mr Bell:** As the Member knows, human rights and foreign and Commonwealth matters are raised by the UK Government, and I fully endorse the position taken forward by them. Anybody who knows me will know that I was a commissioner with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for many years. I passionately believe, in terms of my faith and the principles of being an Orangeman, in civil and religious liberty for all. I will always advocate those principles, no matter which country I am in.

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Paul Givan is not in his place. We will move on.

### **McAuley Precision/McAuley Fabrication: Expansion**

5. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the expansion of McAuley Precision and McAuley Fabrication will benefit North Antrim. (AQO 9045/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** Advanced engineering businesses McAuley Precision and McAuley Fabrication are undertaking a £5 million expansion, supported by Invest Northern Ireland, which will cumulatively create 87 new skilled advanced manufacturing jobs in Ballymoney by 2019. The 87 new jobs are planned to be recruited over the next four years, and it is anticipated that they will generate £2.1 million annually in additional salaries in the north Antrim economy.

**Mr D McIlveen:** I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that he will agree with me that that was excellent news for the economy of north Antrim. However, he will be aware that, unfortunately, it was a case of the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, given the devastating announcement just some weeks later of the job losses at Michelin. Is the Minister willing to meet me, along with stakeholders in the Ballymena and north Antrim area, to discuss a strategy to bring more much needed jobs into the area?

**Mr Bell:** Yes, I am more than happy to do that. The announcement was a surprise to me, and the unions have confirmed that it was a surprise to them.

I pay tribute from this Dispatch Box to the workers specifically at Michelin. Their output was high, and my quarterly report of September

showed some of the best figures ever. Unfortunately, through no fault of their own, there was a five million unit reduction in the tyre market, and there were costs associated with Asia and the fluctuation of the euro that were beyond everyone's control at that particular time. I have met unions and workers, and I praise the fact that, on Friday, as I met some of the management, the workers were back on the floor. We have period of two to two and a half years, right through to 2018, to try to get this right, and I will leave no stone unturned to try to bring in jobs to replace what is there.

**Mr Allister:** The news at McAuley's was most welcome and came against a landscape of a succession of less-good-news stories for Ballymoney, where there has been a downward trend in employment. Although the McAuley announcement was somewhat overshadowed by the news from Michelin, it is nonetheless of itself good news for Ballymoney. On the subject of Ballymoney, what can the Minister tell us about planned and scheduled FDI visits to that part of north Antrim?

**Mr Bell:** What we do is this: we go out to companies and try to attract them. When I talk about the specific area, I do not just say, "Look, just come to this town and don't look at anywhere else". I give them the skill set for the area. I get very disappointed when I read in the media about people talking about declining industrial towns and declining manufacturing. I do not take anything away from what happened with Patton, JTI Gallaher or Michelin, but there is a huge good-news story to tell in that particular area, and it is the good-news story of Moy Park, Radox — with its hundreds of new jobs — Schrader and Wrightbus. You would be privileged to sit on a bus in Hong Kong that is made in Ballymena. Therefore, be conscious of the fact that, according to the census, 40% of us work outside our area. Let us attract the jobs into Northern Ireland. We have a golden opportunity through reducing our corporation tax to make ourselves competitive and to bring in tens of thousands of new jobs.

### **Bombardier/Airbus: Talks**

6. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for his assessment of the aborted talks about the deal between Bombardier and Airbus. (AQO 9046/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** It was a pleasure to meet Bombardier senior management during my visit to Canada. Although Bombardier faces challenges, its management team is confident that those can



be overcome and that sales will follow. It would be wrong to speculate further on the potential outcomes of Bombardier's commercial decisions. I welcome the recent Bombardier announcement of the Quebec Government's plan to invest \$1 billion in the CSeries. All of us should view that as a very positive development.

Bombardier Aerospace is a major contributor to the manufacturing economy. It has a workforce of almost 5,500, and all of us know that it is a vibrant supply chain right across Northern Ireland. Bombardier Belfast supports almost all the company's aircraft programmes, and it provides advanced engineering services to a number of third-party customers. Therefore, it was a very positive meeting, and we are very upbeat about the future of a quality product in the CSeries.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Given what the Minister termed as the "surprise" collapse of Michelin, can he guarantee that he will monitor the situation here so that we do not have any further nasty surprises?

**Mr Bell:** I cannot guarantee that what happened with Michelin can never happen again, and nobody in the House can give that guarantee. What I can guarantee is that we will do all in our power to ensure that it does not happen. What we had at Michelin was almost monthly visits from Invest Northern Ireland. We put in about £4.75 million of taxpayers' money to support the jobs that were there, and we put in training support. On the specific issue of energy, we tried to act where we had the tools to act, and that was with a £750,000 grant to support them in using renewables to bring their energy costs down.

We are keeping a watching brief across a number of areas that are finding it difficult. We have people — in many cases, Invest Northern Ireland — going in monthly. We are also receiving, in many cases, reports — sometimes quarterly reports and sometimes monthly updates — on specific areas. We will do all in our power to protect the manufacturing sector.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his answers today. Does he recognise — I know that he has mentioned it — that Bombardier is leading in cutting-edge technology in composite engineering? Does he recognise the good work that Bombardier is doing in looking at

alternative energy sources, especially in the renewables sector?

**Mr Bell:** Bombardier is doing excellent work. I saw the CSeries in production and saw the busy factory floor and the aircraft being assembled in the final stages of production, and I want to congratulate the entire Bombardier team. They can be very proud, as the Member rightly says, of the CSeries. There is a great sense of pride across Northern Ireland to see wings that have been built in Belfast being attached to what is a game-changing aircraft. There will be challenges, but the management team is confident that those can be overcome and that more success can follow.

What have the Government done? I brought legislation to the House specifically to give the reassurance that was necessary to the investors about their renewable plant, which is valued at well over £100 million, and I am delighted to see that the other finance has now stacked up. We look forward to seeing the reduction, which could mean up to a quarter of energy costs reduced for our largest manufacturer.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister and commend him on his visit to Bombardier in Quebec. Of course, we all echo the support for Bombardier at this time. Minister, do you agree with me that, in light of the commitment of the Quebec Government through the \$1 billion invested in Bombardier, there are lessons there for all of us here about getting behind our industries, particularly our manufacturing industries, in this part of the world?

**Mr Bell:** Yes, I want to fully get behind them. I met one union initially and have had a series of meetings with Manufacturing Northern Ireland. I attended its programme here in Parliament Buildings, where we celebrated the manufacturing industry. We heard the good news that some of the things that we have done in the House have been game changers and are not available anywhere else in the UK. That has supported the manufacturing industry. That is why I think we are seeing growth. I am open to ideas. I will continue to meet manufacturers. I spent a period with the Chamber of Commerce in Magherafelt, with the huge success of SDC Trailers, but I also took the opportunity to meet dozens of people from the manufacturing sector and Manufacturing Northern Ireland. I want to salute them for the growth that they have already achieved, and I will certainly apply whatever is in my toolbox to

help it go forward, because we want those jobs and that growth in the manufacturing sector.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** In your previous answers, Minister, you did not want to speculate much on the \$1 billion bailout of Bombardier and the proposed aid from, I think you said, the federal Canadian Government. Has the Minister made an assessment of the threat to manufacturing jobs in Belfast due to the impact on Bombardier of the loss of the market share to the Chinese state-owned aerospace companies?

**Mr Bell:** Bombardier has made a huge commitment to Northern Ireland. I think that we want to be a little bit careful before we use words like "bailout", because I am not sure that it accurately reflects what has happened. When you bring an aircraft into production, there are huge challenges. I have looked at the Bombardier chart in Canada for airworthiness and all the checks that it has to make, and it is fully confident that it can get entry into the market by the second quarter of 2016. I will not speculate on potential sales or potential discussions and joint ventures, because there is a need for commercial sensitivity.

What I can tell you is that the management are confident that those challenges can be overcome and that they will successfully enter the market in the second quarter of 2016 with a brilliant aircraft, with its wings made here in Northern Ireland, with all the support that gives to the supply chain. I am confident that it will be successful.

**2.30 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** That is the end of the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

### **VAT: Tourism Businesses**

T1. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether he will concede that a reduction in the rate of VAT in Northern Ireland for tourism businesses is unlikely to happen, given that he will be aware that the Northern Ireland Select Committee is considering that issue, and to state what other policies he would like to put in place if that differential is not established. (AQT 3101/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** I do not accept that, just because in a reserved matter people think it less or more likely for us to achieve something, we should not continue to make the argument that we need to achieve it. Our hospitality and tourism

sector is going from strength to strength. Figures recently released showed that our tourism is up. We have set ourselves a target of a £1 billion tourism industry by 2020. Major events will do that, such as the Open Championship coming to Northern Ireland, which is good news. As the Member will know, the only times that the Irish Open sold out were at Royal Portrush and Royal County Down, with a staggering 107,000 paying spectators. Just think how that bodes for the Open coming to Northern Ireland. We will continue to make the argument for a reduction in VAT because the case can be well made, and we will continue to support the sector to achieve that £1 billion target.

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful to the Minister for his reply. The other issue that tourism faces is cuts to the arts: does he feel that that is a difficulty? While I accept that the Irish Open was a huge success at Royal County Down, the other challenge, particularly in a constituency like South Down, is growing tourism, making it sustainable, having jobs and increasing tourism spend. He needs to address all those things. How does he propose to address some of them?

**Mr Bell:** The first thing in growing tourism is for the industry to look at tourism and hospitality as a career choice from the outset and give it the status that it deserves as an industry that provides a similar number of jobs in Northern Ireland to agriculture. The first thing that you want to do is ensure that you have your skills base right. Tourism research informs me that people remember the people they meet at the first point of contact, and we must make sure that they are properly skilled. The second thing is your tourism offering. We have a huge offering from the creative industries, and you mentioned the arts. There is "Game of Thrones", which is HBO's most successful series, right through to golf tourism and the beauty of the geography of Northern Ireland, particularly in areas such as the Mourne mountains. All in all, we need to thank the industry for the 2% increase in visitor numbers that it achieved in the first six months of this year.

### **Michelin Job Losses: Government Support**

T2. **Mr Lyons** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the news last week about Michelin, which was devastating not only for north Antrim but for many people in the East Antrim constituency, for an assurance that his Department will continue to work with

Invest NI, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and the Department for Employment and Learning to ensure that support is available for workers at the Michelin plant, not only in the next few months but up to 2018 and beyond. (AQT 3102/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** Yes, I can give that assurance, and we have already started. I place on the record my thanks to Stephen Farry, the Minister for Employment and Learning, who, on hearing the news, was immediately in my office. We spent several hours together discussing with the mayor and the chief executive of the council what we could do and what Invest NI support could come to the council. We acknowledge the work of the Michelin management team in ensuring that people will not be out of work until 2018. Their hope and ambition, which is an ambition that everybody in the House should have, is that those people can leave work and go to another job with a healthy pay cheque in their hands. What we have to do now is reduce our corporation tax, set the date on which we will do that and attract the 30,000-plus new jobs that are available to Northern Ireland.

**Mr Lyons:** I thank the Minister for his answer. There has also been an awful lot of good news in East Antrim recently. The Minister visited my constituency on Friday and was able to see the excellent work of businesses and a social enterprise there. We now have the Gobbins visitor attraction, which he has also been to, so we have much positive news as well. Can the Minister tell the House how many jobs have been promoted in East Antrim during this Assembly term? What can Invest NI do to ensure that employment can continue to grow in my constituency?

**Mr Bell:** Mr Lyons will be proud to know that, at one point in the history of Northern Ireland, the Gobbins cliff path was more successful in attracting tourists than the Giant's Causeway. I can see huge potential for what can be done there in the future. On the specific question on jobs promoted in East Antrim, there have been 672 external, with 33 in the last period. In East Antrim locally, from 2011-12 to the forwarding period, we have had 458 and 119. The number of jobs promoted in the East Antrim parliamentary constituency from 2011-12 to 2014-15 sits at 1,130, with 152 in the last period.

## Wind Energy

T3. **Ms Hanna** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, now that the NIRO consultation has ended, to outline what

conversations he might be able to have with the Department of Energy and Climate Change across the water about the future of wind energy in Northern Ireland. (AQT 3103/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** I was very disappointed that, having consulted the coalition Government and set out our figure for 2017-18, a Conservative Government stepped in and immediately changed it with respect to wind. They changed their position; we did not change ours. In response to that, I tried to support farmers, I tried to support small-scale industry and I tried to support large-scale industry. However, it fell at the first hurdle in the House, with some Members telling me, "We will not allow you to spend one penny extra in Northern Ireland". Subsequent to that, the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) changed its position. In its changed position, DECC allowed us to bring across over 90% large-scale and a significant number of small-scale. Others were to follow, and we could socialise the costs across the whole of the United Kingdom. I will continue to do what I can for small-scale in conversations. We are in detailed discussions and correspondence with DECC, but I also have to be conscious of the cost of energy to the Northern Ireland domestic user and to industry.

**Ms Hanna:** With all that in mind, does the Minister regret his earlier statement about the certainty of that funding, which gave considerable comfort to small-scale producers? I appreciate that there are mitigating circumstances in the UK-wide context, but can he outline what, specifically, he will be able to do to help that sector recover?

**Mr Bell:** I am seeking to ensure the best outcomes in cost to the consumer and the number of megawatts that can be achieved. I have to take DECC's changing position into account. It took position a, and I responded to position a in the best interests of Northern Ireland and supported the small-scale. I tried to put it through the Committee of the House, and the Committee rejected it. Then, when DECC came up with position b, I tried to look at what was in the best interests of Northern Ireland for the industry and for the domestic consumer. Energy is devolved, but costs are socialised. We need to take into account the three parts of what is known as the energy trilemma. You cannot go just for any one sector: you have to look at security of supply. We need to get the North/South interconnector up and running, as we are missing out on £20 million savings because of the circumstances of that project.

However, we will always have to look at cost and at people's ability to pay.

### **Energy: Meeting with Amber Rudd**

T4. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether, given his previous comments and previous meetings with Amber Rudd from the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC), he would be willing to meet her again. (AQT 3104/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** I will meet her any time, any place, anywhere, but Amber Rudd was a Minister in the previous Government. The present Prime Minister was Prime Minister in the previous Government. As a result of discussions that my predecessor had with them, we went out to our industry and said that the date is 2017, with a grace period to 2018. When the Conservative Government came into power, they moved the goalposts in Northern Ireland, and everything that I have done subsequent to that and to DECC's change of position is to try to drive forward a position that can ensure that the Northern Ireland consumer — the business customer — gets best value at minimum cost.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his clarity and welcome the fact that he intends to meet Amber Rudd again. Do I take that as a declaration of his intent to go in and fight for those people who are clearly losing out?

**Mr Bell:** People in my constituency borrowed money against their own homes to go for renewables on the basis of what DECC had allowed Northern Ireland to do in the terms of its consultation. I am acutely aware of their needs, and, when the record of this period is written, they will see that, when Amber Rudd changed her position, I tried to put legislation specific to Northern Ireland through the House. The Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee turned down legislation that I was seeking to introduce for farmers and small-scale users. When Amber Rudd changed her position again, I tried to nuance the position, and the Committee again turned down proposals for small-scale users and farmers. I am in discussion with Amber Rudd, in writing and through my officials, to see what we can do for those people, but I can only do what is realistic and introduce legislation that the Committee allows to go to the Floor.

### **Energy Legislation: Committee Position**

T5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment at what point he believes that the Committee rejected legislation, given that, at no point did it reject legislation and, on two occasions, it sought further clarification, albeit that, if the Minister is so unaware of that, that makes for a worse situation, given the two preposterously bad evidence sessions that the Committee held on the matter. (AQT 3105/11-16)

**Mr Bell:** I am fearful when a Committee Chairman has to ask a Minister what his own Committee did in terms of delay and getting legislation through. Members of the Committee, including the Chairman, have adopted different positions at different times. One cannot be a chameleon and change colours depending on who we are talking to. The Chairman of the Committee cannot be like a cushion, simply bearing the imprint of whoever sat on him last. We did not change our position. I brought legislation to the Committee, and it got delayed and did not go through. I nuanced it and tried to bring additional information, but it got delayed and did not go through. I hope that farmers look to that Committee to see what could have been done, had it followed the advice that I originally gave it. Those people who are losing out — Members may laugh — should take a close look at the work of the Committee.

**Mr McGlone:** That is very good. It is good to have a Minister who lives in a parallel world. I invite him to look at Hansard and the public record. On a unanimous cross-party basis, the spotlight shone very firmly on his Department, and its shortcomings were incredibly crass. Is the Minister prepared to be part of the solution, which, on a cross-party basis and with the agreement of all parties, we have sought to bring with his cooperation, which is not great today?

**Mr Speaker:** I am glad that you could find a question.

**2.45 pm**

**Mr Bell:** Sadly, the Chairman is not across his brief on what occurred. When we tried to do what we said we would do in Northern Ireland, it did not go forward. I agree that there was a cross-party basis for not taking it forward. My understanding, when I sat down with the Chairman in my room upstairs and pleaded the case for small-scale farmers and others who are suffering today — many of whom borrowed against their house — is that he was supportive. Then, in the Committee room, the

position was completely different. In fact, I was told that Northern Ireland would not allow one single extra penny. You saw the work of the Committee. It is a matter of record what I brought to the House. It is a matter of record how DECC changed its position. I am more than happy to stand with anyone and look at what DECC proposed, what it changed, and how, in every single case, I looked at what was in the best interests of Northern Ireland as a whole.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. Time is up.

## Environment

**Mr Speaker:** I inform Members that questions 8 and 12 have been withdrawn.

### Councillors: Code of Conduct

1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of the Environment when the review into the Northern Ireland local government code of conduct for councillors will be completed. (AQO 9055/11-16)

**Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I have appointed the chair of a working group that will shortly commence a review of the Northern Ireland local government code of conduct for councillors. The working group will review the principles in part 3 and the rules on decision-making in part 8 by February 2016. I will consider the outcome of the review and any proposed changes to the code of conduct prior to consultation.

*(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Newton] in the Chair)*

It is important that the local government sector has an opportunity to put forward its views on the code, and the working group will engage with key stakeholders and invite them to give their views in writing or at a stakeholders' engagement event. The review will be completed, and consultation on any revised code of conduct will commence during the current mandate. However, I have asked the chair of the working group to seek the views of key stakeholders on the possibility of shortening the timetable for the review to enable the consultation to be completed and the revised code put in place during this mandate.

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Is the Minister confident that the anomalies in part 8.1 of the

code will be rectified in a way that enables councillors to interact lawfully with one another?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for his question. Part 8 has caused the most consternation and, indeed, I think it fair to say, confusion among councillors and NILGA, their representative body. Many of the issues revolve around the fact that it can be interpreted as diluting or emasculating their performance as elected representatives. The concerns expressed were that councillors would not be allowed to organise support for, or opposition against, a particular recommendation or matter being considered; they would not be allowed to lobby other councillors on a matter being considered or not to comply with political group decisions on a matter being considered where the decisions differed from a councillor's own views. Further, they would not be allowed to act as an advocate for, or promote, a particular recommendation in relation to matters being considered. Basically, councillors would not be allowed to be politicians or public representatives. The working group will look at each of these concerns, and part 8 in general, and I look forward to receiving its comments. Clearly, I am hopeful and confident that these issues will be resolved.

**Mr Campbell:** Can the Minister assure the House that, when the reviewed code of conduct sees the light of day, we will not have a repeat of the current position that at least one councillor in Northern Ireland, in Londonderry and Strabane, has not only been convicted of a criminal offence but has repeatedly not only refused to condemn terrorist incidents but expressed his support for dissident republican activity? I am sure that the Minister is well aware of whom I speak. That person remains an elected representative and is not seen as having breached the current code of conduct.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for his question. The aspects of the code that are being reviewed are in parts 3 and 8. I have described in detail the implications around part 8, which pertains to decision-making by councils and councillors. Part 3 deals with principles, and that will hopefully address some of the concerns that the Member has raised. I cannot pre-empt the outworkings of a review, but it will go out to consultation and the Member and party colleagues will have an opportunity to take part in that consultation.

**Mr Cree:** Minister, while it is essential that we have a workable code of conduct, do you agree that it is important that the content of that code

or protocol should not become a tool for vexatious purposes by political opponents?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank Mr Cree for that question, although I am sure that no political opponents would stoop to such depths as to use what is written in the code as a means to attack or detract from a political opponent. I think that it is vitally important that all members adhere to what is written in the code and also to what is not written with regards to the respect with which they treat their fellow politicians and members of the public.

**Mr Allister:** Will there be any opportunity to write into the code an obligation on councillors to request and receive allowances only to their personal accounts, in order to end the abuse that is presently ongoing with Sinn Féin councillors in some areas? If that cannot be done within the code, how will the Minister deal with that abuse?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank Mr Allister for that question; again, I am aware of the situation to which the Member refers. However, I fear that this review will not provide an opportunity to address that anomaly that he quite rightly identifies. Both primary and subordinate legislation clearly state that councillor allowances are payable by councils directly to councillors. The relevant legislation is contained in Part 3 of the Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 and in the Local Government (Payments to Councillors) Regulations (NI) 2012.

In light of the recent court proceedings, my officials wrote to all district council chief executives to remind them of this legislation, but the legislation is silent on which bank accounts councillors' allowances must be paid into. I have written to council chief executives on the matter, and I will speak to them all about it in the near future. Whereas the Assembly has the power to investigate whether an account number given by a Member is actually a personal account, councils do not have that investigative duty or power.

## Neighbourhood Renewal/Regeneration Powers

2. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of the Environment whether neighbourhood renewal and regeneration powers will be transferred to councils in April 2016. (AQO 9056/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** Thank you —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I am sorry, Minister. I understand that there has been an administrative error within the system. I understand that you were informed that the question had been withdrawn. The Member was not informed that the question had been withdrawn and that another Department may well answer the question.

I call Mr Trevor Lunn.

## Natural Environment Fund

3. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has secured the continuation of the natural environment fund after May 2016. (AQO 9057/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** Conscious of the difficult operating environment and the fact that current funding arrangements finish on 31 March 2016, I had indicated that I would urgently consider the development of appropriate funding mechanisms to enable third parties to deliver key environmental outcomes from April 2016. I have listened to the views of stakeholders, who particularly sought certainty on funding and multi-year funding, and I today announce a new environment fund that will cover two years, with possible extension for a third year. Funding will be allocated for the next financial year, 2016-17, with the potential for funding in future years subject to future Budget decisions made by the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly. That is a broader fund than the previous natural environment fund. The new fund will cover the delivery of a wider range of key environmental outcomes under two broad themes: ensuring good habitat quality, landscape and species abundance and diversity; and the promotion of health, well-being, resource efficiency and sustainable economic development, realising the full value of our environment. It will provide a more comprehensive, transparent and consistent funding mechanism by which the majority of environmental outcomes can be delivered by third parties under grant aid.

Alongside the environment fund, I have also recognised that the Department will continue to need to develop additional mechanisms to support the delivery of environmental priorities in 2016-17, and beyond, via funding to third parties.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Minister for that comprehensive answer. It is quite a coincidence that he should launch the fund on the same day as I ask that question, but he has completely killed any opportunity for a

supplementary question. Thank you very much.

**Mr Flanagan:** I will be honest: I was not really listening to the Minister's answer, so I do not know whether he has answered my question or not, but I presume that he has not, because I am asking him about something else. Can he give us an update on the scheme announced in June, similar to the plastic bag tax? He proposes to bring in a deposit-return scheme for bottles. Can he give us any update on that off the top of his head?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for the question, although the link is quite tenuous. I think the Member gave that away himself by saying that he had not listened to my previous answer but was going to ask me about something completely different anyway.

I floated the idea of introducing something along the lines of a deposit-return scheme for drinks containers — bottles, largely — at the start of the summer, and since then my officials have been working on it. We have been looking at and learning from other jurisdictions. Scotland ran a pilot on it, and we are now looking at the results of that pilot. It is something that I will be speaking about to my counterpart — counterpart, sorry; that is another vessel — counterpart in Scotland, Minister Lochhead, in January when I visit him. I see great opportunities, not just for our environment, but for collaboration with other jurisdictions. There will be considerable outlay involved if we are to proceed with that scheme, but I believe that the expense of the initial outlay can be offset and greatly reduced by collaborating with Scotland and, potentially, the Irish Republic.

**Mr Rogers:** Minister, thanks for your answers thus far. What will the total value of the fund be? Will you ensure that funding will be available to ensure the effective management of areas of outstanding natural beauty like the Mournes?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that question. As yet, we do not have detail on how much will be available; I am working on that with officials. It is vital that those organisations have certainty as early as possible. They will be able to apply from this week. I intend to open applications from Thursday, and they will have a month, up until 10 December, in which to apply. In the meantime, we will work on how much money we can make available from the fund. As the fund is broader than the natural environment fund that I established this year, I

hope that the pot will be bigger in terms of finance available as well. It will also be broader in that it will be able to assist groups like those the Member referred to that ensure the effective management of areas of natural beauty such as the Mournes.

It is worth underlining that, even this year, with an extremely challenging budget outcome for my Department, over half a million pounds was allocated to various environmental NGOs to continue to provide a full range of environmental and visitor management for areas of outstanding natural beauty. Indeed, it was mainly for the Mournes area. I can also confirm that those organisations will be able to apply for funding from the new environment fund that I have spoken of today.

**Ms Lo:** I am sorry for my voice today.

I am absolutely delighted with the Minister's announcement, and I am sure that the sector is very reassured by it. I understand that the Minister has said that he is still working out what money there will be. What about the built heritage sector? Will it be protected, too? Will it be assured of further funding from that pot?

### 3.00 pm

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Chairperson of the Environment Committee for that question, which is indeed very topical, given 'The Detail' report that, I believe, was given comprehensive coverage on the BBC's 'Talkback' today.

Regrettably, built heritage projects will not be able to avail themselves of the environment fund that we are talking about. However, I very much value our built heritage, and the funding that I was able to provide to it in the previous financial year is indicative of that. That should be looked at, rather than how much I was unable to provide in that direction this year.

Under the restructuring of Departments, the function of built heritage will go in a different direction to that of environment and will lie in the new Department for Communities. However, it is extremely important that its importance and value be recognised. Built heritage plays a massive role in promoting our economy and, indeed, the health and well-being of our citizens.

I have spoken to officials about built heritage's importance, and they recognise its importance. It has frustrated my officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) greatly that the only money that we were able to allocate to

built heritage this year was through the carrier-bag levy. We were able to allocate almost £600,000 to buildings that were deemed to have a community function or benefit. I am aware of a number of buildings of great value out there that really need work done on them. We are working on finding a way in which to do just that.

## Planning Applications

4. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the criteria used when making the decision to call in a planning application. (AQO 9058/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** Since April 2015, district councils have been responsible for determining the vast majority of planning applications. Under the reformed two-tier planning system, applications for local and major developments are submitted to, and determined by, local councils, while applications for regionally significant developments are processed and decided by the Department.

The Planning Act also allows the Department to direct that any planning application be referred to it instead of being dealt with by a council. In recognising and respecting the important role of councils in making decisions on the future development of their area, I envisage that call-in power being exercised only in exceptional circumstances. I believe that councils, with locally elected and accountable representatives, are best placed to take the key decisions about the future growth and development of their local areas and communities. However, there may be circumstances in which a proposed development raises issues of such regional importance or strategic interest that the application should be called in so that the Department can in effect take over the role of decision-maker.

My Department has published guidance, 'Notification and Call In of Applications', which highlights the legislative procedures to be complied with by district councils when notifying the Department on all types of applications, including potential call-in cases, and provides an indication of the matters that may be considered by the Department when deciding whether an application should be called in. Those include considering the relevant development plan; the opinions of statutory consultees; the national importance of the proposal; the relationship of the proposal to a regionally significant application; the significance of the development to the whole or

part of Northern Ireland; and any potential significant effects that a proposal may have outside Northern Ireland. Each case will, however, be considered on its own merits, and the fact that a particular development proposal may be complex or controversial will not necessarily mean that it is of strategic interest or regional importance.

**Mr McQuillan:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you recently called in the application of the Cam Burn wind farm, which is causing a bit of a breeze in my constituency. You issued a notice of an opinion to approve, which is at odds with the views of the local council. What happens next with that application?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that question. There has indeed been some attention around my decision to call in this application and to approve it. I have written to the council not only to outline my decision to approve it, and the rationale behind that, but to inform the council of its next steps. The council has 28 days during which it can ask for a hearing on my decision, in effect. Should it choose to do so, that hearing will be held by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC), which will give its determination on the application. However, the final decision will ultimately come back to me. Should the council wish to go down that route, and the PAC decides that I was wrong, the decision would come back to me and I could reverse it. I am very doubtful that the PAC would find that to be so, and the decision would come back to me either way.

**Mr Swann:** Minister, when you say that you doubt that the PAC will change that, have you already made up your mind? So, is there no point in members of the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council coming to you? If you are saying in the Chamber today that you have made up your mind, you have breached that entire process. By calling in this planning application, you have undermined councillors on the council's planning committee. It was disgraceful that the chief planning officer in that area and the chair of the planning committee found out about your decision through the BBC.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that question. However, I correct him by saying that I have not breached any process or procedure. I share his disdain about the manner in which elected representatives found out about this decision. I do not know how the BBC got hold of this so quickly, and I place that on record. The council now has a chance to ask for a hearing. I am not saying that I would overrule



the PAC, should it come to a different view to mine. However, I am saying that it would have to come back to me, and I very much doubt that the commission would come to a different conclusion than have I, given that council and DOE planners thought that this was a nailed-on approval. I may have done the council a favour in some respects.

I caught the end of Minister Bell's Question Time, and there was something around the Northern Ireland renewables or renewables obligation certificates (ROCs) situation here. Given its failure to issue an approval to what, I think, is a blatantly approvable application that it might have stopped or stymied, the council could have left itself in a precarious position and open to not just a planning appeal but further legal proceedings.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. It appears that when you mention the word renewables in this place, you have to get things firmly on the record or, when you meet a Minister, make sure that you have someone to take an independent minute, as I did.

Will the Minister outline what progress has been made towards meeting the Programme for Government renewable energy targets, as his Department fits into that?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that question. The Programme for Government targets are a material consideration when dealing with or processing any planning application. The Member will be aware that I published the strategic planning policy statement, the SPPS, on 28 September. It consolidates, updates and improves the policy context of the suite of planning policy statements (PPS), including PPS 18 on renewable energy. The aim of the SPPS in relation to renewable energy is:

*"to facilitate the siting of renewable energy generating facilities in appropriate locations within the built and natural environment in order to achieve Northern Ireland's renewable energy targets and to realise the benefits of renewable energy without compromising other environmental assets of acknowledged importance."*

The SPPS will, inter alia, continue to support and contribute to the renewable energy target of 40% of electricity consumption here in the North from renewable resources by 2020, as set out by the Executive and indicated in DETI's strategic energy framework. Furthermore, DETI

has advised that the Executive's 2015 Programme for Government target of 20% renewable energy generation is being met.

**Ms Sugden:** I will bring the issue back to where we started. Does the Minister concede that his initial decision to approve Cam Burn wind farm was ill advised, given the planning legislation, and that, since I submitted two priority written questions, which he is yet to answer, he has done a quick U-turn to abide by the law?

**Mr Durkan:** I look forward to reading that question again in Hansard. I have not conceded anything; I have outlined what the council could do, should it wish to challenge my decision, which, let me state clearly, is, I believe, the right decision and is a legal decision.

I have also answered a priority question from the Member. She may not have received the answer yet, but I have answered that question. I am taken aback by her, shall we say, recent interest in this planning application. The planning application was in the Department for a considerable time and has been with the council for six months or more, yet the first the council or I heard from the Member on it was after she learned about it on the BBC.

## Road Safety

5. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline what action he is taking to address the rising numbers of fatalities and serious injuries on local roads. (AQO 9059/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** The number of road deaths in 2015 is a serious concern, and I extend my sympathy to those who have lost loved ones and those who have suffered life-changing injuries. So far this year, 61 people have died, compared with 69 at the same time last year.

At the beginning of the year, severe cuts were made by the Executive to my Department's Budget allocation. Despite the very challenging financial position, I was able to allocate just over £1 million to road safety communications, grants and educational materials. In recent weeks, I have been able to supplement that with a further £184,000 through internal reallocations. Despite the regrettable 50% reduction in the road safety budget, my Department continues to take a range of actions to reduce deaths and serious injuries on our roads. We focus on problem areas, such as drink-driving, speeding and carelessness and inattention and on groups that are over-

represented in the casualty figures. Those areas are the key focus of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill, which completed its Consideration Stage in June. I will shortly bring the Bill back to the Assembly to conclude its legislative passage.

In March, I launched a new motorcyclist safety campaign, and in June I launched the 2015-16 road safety grant scheme, through which I have approved funding for 15 projects across the North. Also in June, I launched a road safety community toolkit to give local voluntary groups all the resources they need to organise events, bringing road safety messages into the heart of local communities. Also in June, I rolled out the safe driving teaching aid, enabling driving instructors to address road safety with learner drivers. My Department also continues to provide a range of resources and schemes to be used by teachers to allow them to improve road safety behaviours in children and young people.

I assure you that I remain fully committed to continuing to work with my Executive colleagues, the PSNI and other stakeholders to improve road safety and reduce casualties.

**Mr McKinney:** I am sure that the House joins the Minister in recognising the deep pain felt in families and communities as a result of such tragedies. Will the Minister further outline what action will be taken to target vulnerable road users, such as younger people and older people?

**Mr Durkan:** There are many activities being carried out through the Department's mix of channels to address vulnerable road users. Through its social media activity and TV, radio and outdoor advertising, the Department regularly reminds drivers to give extra consideration to children, older road users and those with less protection, such as pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. Messages also address vulnerable road users to increase their own safety, as they share the road with motorists, by wearing high-vis vests or coats, crossing at a safe place and obeying the rules of the road as advised in the Highway Code, amongst others.

My Department provides a range of resources and schemes to be used by teachers to allow them to improve the road safety of their pupils. The initiatives include, among others, the road safety teaching aid calendar, the enhanced cycling proficiency scheme, the junior road safety officer scheme and education packs. They have been very well received, and, for the

most recent initiatives, early indications show a positive response.

### 3.15 pm

Through various channels, the Department reminds parents that it is their responsibility to ensure that children are properly restrained when travelling in vehicles. As I said in my original answer, I have recently approved funding for 15 road safety projects through the road safety grant scheme. Two of the projects address older road user safety, which is one of my road safety priorities. I have, therefore, approved additional funding for each project to extend their coverage to an even wider audience. One project addresses the importance of fitness-to-drive through drama. The second will deliver a comprehensive training package on alcohol and drugs awareness and hazard identification and will provide a series of driving assessments for older people.

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

### Local Government Reform: Cost Review

T1. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he sees merit in a financial review of the cost of local government reform, particularly considering that the transfer of functions, such as the planning portal and some off-street car parks, has been estimated by NILGA as costing somewhere in the region of £100 million, which could hardly be considered to be cost-neutral to councils. (AQT 3111/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for his question. It was always anticipated that, as we approached local government reform and the Assembly voted for it, there would be significant costs in the beginning but that, when offset against the savings that would be yielded in the medium to long term, they would pale into insignificance. I am aware of major concerns felt by and across local government on some of the issues that the Member has referred to. The problems regarding the planning portal are a lot less than they are with the transfer of off-street car parking. The responsibility for that lies, ultimately, with the DRD; it transferred that function. However, in my opinion and that of local government, the budget that transferred with the function was nowhere near adequate.

As regards a review, I will continue to work with local government, chiefly through the partnership panel. I will also meet a group of chief executives of the new councils tomorrow. I will be happy — well, I will not be happy, but I have no doubt that I will hear more from them on the issue tomorrow and through the various fora in which I engage with them. Local government knows that it has a friend in me. I will do everything I can to persuade my Executive colleagues to ensure that local government is adequately resourced to fulfil its new duties and provide good services for ratepayers at good value.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I welcome the fact that the Minister has said that he will work in partnership. I hope that he does so, particularly through NILGA and SOLACE. He agrees that, regarding the transfer of functions, there have been discrepancies between the cost impacts on councils and those projected by DOE and other Departments.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that question. I slated another Department — I can speak about it, but I cannot really speak for it. I can speak about the DOE and the function that we transferred: planning. I took a brave and bold step; it was unique among Ministers or those with responsibility for Departments that were transferring functions. Early in the previous financial year, I ring-fenced the budget for planning that was to go to local government so that it would not be impacted by the in-year cuts that Departments were facing. As a result, I had to make bigger cuts in different areas of my Department. That was based solely on my belief that the functions should be transferred at a point that was cost-neutral to the ratepayers in the new councils. I came up to the mark on that one. I am aware that some issues have arisen around planning, but, like I said, they are minuscule in comparison with some of the other issues facing local government. However, that does not diminish my appetite to resolve them.

## **Wind Farms: Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty**

T2. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his views on the development of wind farms in areas of outstanding natural beauty, given that wind farms are a very topical issue. (AQT 3112/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that question. Wind farms are, indeed, very topical

this afternoon. Following the transfer of the majority of planning functions to local councils, the determination of most wind energy proposals falls to councils, as we discussed. As such, my Department's strategic planning policy statement (SPPS) requires that the environmental, landscape, visual and amenity impacts associated with or arising from renewable energy development are given proper consideration and that adequate protection is afforded to the region's natural and cultural heritage features.

While planning policy does not rule out wind farm development in areas of outstanding natural beauty, it is a key policy objective to ensure that the environmental, landscape, visual and amenity impacts of such developments in such sensitive areas are fully considered before any decision is reached. In addition, the SPPS makes clear that a cautious approach to renewable energy development proposals will apply in designated landscapes that are of significant value, such as areas of outstanding natural beauty. That is one area in the SPPS on which we have actually strengthened policy and made it less permissive. I know that that was the view among Members, which came across very strongly in the Environment Committee's report on wind energy. I responded to that and tightened it up in the SPPS.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Minister for that. What is his view on the proposed wind farm development in the Mournes?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for the question; he is bringing it back to the Mournes again. An application for Gruggandoo wind farm was received by the strategic planning division on 16 March 2015. It proposes 12 turbines, with an overall height of 125 metres, with a potential power output of 39.6 MW. An environmental statement to accompany the application was received on 31 March, and the application was declared an article 31 on that date, so it will be determined centrally by the Department. The application has been advertised in accordance with environmental impact assessment regulations, and neighbour notifications have been carried out and the consultation sent to the appropriate bodies, including Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. To date, 41 objections from third parties have been received and, just yesterday, a letter of support came in. The application is still under consideration by my Department, so I cannot comment further on it.

## Ancient and Culturally Important Trees: Registry

T3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of the Environment what is being done to create a registry of ancient and culturally important trees in Northern Ireland. (AQT 3113/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** I thank Mr Cree. I thought that he was going to ask about a registry of Crees rather than trees. The Member has raised the issue with me in written correspondence, and I have received quite a bit of correspondence on it through social media.

The patchwork of native broadleaved woods and hedgerows that comprise our countryside gives it a unique appearance in the context of north-west Europe. Many of Northern Ireland's native woodlands and hedgerows possess high biodiversity, landscape and cultural value and have been given statutory protection as special areas of conservation, areas of special scientific interest and areas of outstanding natural beauty. Although many trees of special interest, due to their great age or other factors, are located in the foregoing protected areas, many grow in the countryside or in urban areas and deserve and require individual protection.

Many of the legislative functions regarding the protection of trees, the management of existing trees and the consideration of further or future protection of trees through, for example, the making of tree preservation orders transferred to the councils on 1 April this year. Councils also have the powers to draw up local development plans, which can provide policy and guidance on the management and protection of trees as part of the development proposals. I know that the Woodland Trust is campaigning very vociferously for a national tree register to celebrate our remarkable trees. I welcome the initiative for the creation of a register of trees of national special interest for Northern Ireland. I have instructed my officials to consider the resources required to establish and maintain a register and to advise me who would be best placed to administer such a register.

**Mr Cree:** I thank the Minister for that. It is indeed good news. Does he envisage that the only protection would be tree protection orders or is some other form of protection needed for these trees, particularly the ancient trees that may be one-offs?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for that supplementary. As I said, I have tasked my officials to do some work on this, and they will

not do so in isolation. I have instructed them to go to the Woodland Trust to hear its views on this and to councils, which, as I said, now have responsibility for the protection of trees. I am not passing the buck to them. I am saying quite clearly that I want to work with councils and other interested third parties to see that this gets done.

## Bonfires: Licensing Proposals

T4. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the licensing of bonfires and to state whether he is aware that some councils provide differential funding for bonfires depending on whether they are traditional or non-traditional. (AQT 3114/11-16)

**Mr Durkan:** I thank Mr McCrea for that question. This is another issue on which I have announced my intention to work to resolve what is a perennial problem here in Northern Ireland. Many communities suffer at the hands of those who organise bonfires badly or whose motives are not to bring communities together but to create division and indeed chaos in their own communities.

My officials and I have been working behind the scenes with councils on the issue. There is a lot of good practice across councils. Across the North, we have seen a reduction in the number of bonfires. Indeed, I read a report in today's 'Belfast Telegraph' that stated that there has been a huge reduction in the number of fires in Belfast that burn tyres, which is to be welcomed. There is good practice. It is important that we develop that good practice, roll it out and ensure that it is uniform across all council areas.

I think that everyone — everyone in their right mind — agreed that, of the list of options that I had come forward with, the third option, that of introducing a licensing scheme, was the best way to go. I think that it has to be uniform across all council areas. I know that some councils allocate bonfire management scheme money to community groups that organise bonfires. In some cases, the group that organises the bonfire might not necessarily be the group that gets the money, and I think that that was what the Member was getting at. That needs to be stamped out. I am not trying to stamp out bonfires per se. I know that a lot of people run these things responsibly, enjoy them and see them as part of their culture.

**Mr B McCrea:** Is the Minister aware that some community groups feel that when you fund something, it attracts the attention of outside

agencies and that this applies in particular — I will say it here — to paramilitaries? Is he aware that those community groups are looking for such funding, if there is to be a licensing scheme, to be properly recognised? Will he take the opportunity to meet some community leaders so that they can explain the problems that they are having?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank Mr McCrea for his question. I have said previously in the Assembly that there is a need for collective, if not unanimous, political support for a scheme like this to succeed, and not just political support but community support. Therefore, it is extremely important that we consult far and wide.

I would be happy to meet the community group or groups to which the Member referred, as I have already met people from diverse communities, shall we say, to discuss this issue as well, as I said earlier, as continuing discussions with councils and other Departments and agencies.

**3.30 pm**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Time is up. That concludes Question Time. I invite Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

## Executive Committee Business

### Shared Education Bill: Second Stage

*Debate resumed on motion:*

*That the Second Stage of the Shared Education Bill [NIA 66/11-16] be agreed. — [Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education).]*

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I have listened with interest to the debate and welcome the interest that Members have shown in their contributions on this important matter. I will further reflect on the points that Members have raised during the debate.

Moving the Bill to its next stage will afford the opportunity to consider fully the issues. While there may be differing views as to what is necessary in the Bill, I welcome the general

support for advancing shared education and for the need for legislation to define shared education. However, I acknowledge that there were a number of dissenting voices throughout the debate. Shared education has the potential to make a significant difference to the educational outcomes of our young people and to building a strong and shared community. Most Members have endorsed this, with impressive examples from their own constituencies.

I will now turn to Members' comments; I may not be able to cover them all, but I hope to cover the generality of them in my concluding remarks.

The Chair of the Education Committee set out the Committee's position on shared education and reflected on the fact that the Committee has carried out its own inquiry on the matter. I hope that the Bill passes Second Stage and moves to Committee Stage; that will give the Committee a further opportunity to explore the issues in and around the Bill with those whom it deems to be interested or wishes to see.

I welcome further debate on shared education and on the Bill. The Bill is short, but it is important. The Bill's brevity does not reflect the Department's commitment to shared education; the brevity of the Bill reflects what is needed in legislation around this issue. Members should also familiarise themselves with the shared education policy that was published earlier this year, which gives greater detail about the Department's policy and work and scope in and around shared education and direction of travel.

I suspect that the issues that were raised by the Chair to do with educational improvement, connection with the curriculum and definition, as he pointed out, will be the subject of much debate in the next stage of the Bill. The very core of shared education has to be educational improvement. It has to ensure that it connects with the curriculum, not only in schools but with youth work as well. The definition of shared education has been much debated. The inclusion of all sections in legislation around schools in terms of section 75 has, to date, proven difficult, but I await the Committee's further deliberations on that matter.

Will there be a Caesar giving a thumbs up or a thumbs down on programmes? I know that the Chair was jesting somewhat — at least I hope that he was — but there will be, as there have been up to now, clearly defined criteria against which the merits of applications and projects will be judged. Any applications that to date have gone through panels in the Education

Authority and which have proven successful have been informed, and any that have not proven successful have been informed on where there were shortcomings in their projects and where they may want to concentrate in any further application. The application process for funding for shared education is open and transparent and will ensure that everyone involved in shared education is aware of how they are being judged against the criteria.

The Chair also raised the issue of whether, under this definition, children with different socio-economic levels may qualify for shared education if they all come from the one religion. That will not be the case because the legislation is quite clear that shared education is the educating together of those of different religious belief and socio-economic deprivation, so there will have to be a cross-community element. A number of Members raised the issue —

**Mr Weir:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I will, yes.

**Mr Weir:** I have a point that was raised at Committee. Obviously, the definition in the legislation is reasonable numbers of Protestants and Roman Catholics. I suppose, first, there is an issue about how that is defined, and, secondly, the query was on whether two schools from the same sector that may well have some level of mix in them would be able to qualify.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I do not think that it rules it out. I do not want to prejudge any application from any school. Under the criteria that we are using or can use, imaginative proposals from schools should certainly be given an opportunity to be judged against the criteria that will be published.

A number of Members raised concerns about shared education versus integrated education. Mr Lunn raised concerns about this matter and, in fairness, has done so in the past, although he is supportive of shared education policies and the Bill as it stands. No doubt, he will make his mind up about any amendments, or anything else, that come forward. Let us be clear: it is not a case of either/or. These are programmes of work in our society that, in my opinion, are complementary of each other but which should not be seen as competition to each other.

However, I will caution the House. Some Members may be of the view that they need to make it a duty rather than a power around shared education. Shared education includes

the word "promote"; the legislation on integrated education does not include the word "promote". If we move to a stage where shared education is a duty and includes the word "promote", there may well be a justifiable argument that we have put integrated education into the shadows. I caution Members, when they are discussing whether there should be a power or a duty on the Department of Education, to remember that there is a difference between the definition of integrated and Irish-medium education and the Department's duties on that and the shared education clause, which includes, as was the will of the House in a previous debate on the Education Act, the word "promote". It is not in the definition of integrated, so Members should be careful in how they approach those things.

**Mr Lunn:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He talked about the will of the House. It was the will of the House in 2012 that the word "promote" should be included in the obligation to promote integrated education. I know that that was in a private Members' motion rather than legislation, but it was clearly the will of the House.

**Mr O'Dowd:** As the Member said, a motion is not legislation. Several pieces of legislation have gone through the House since then, and the House has not taken a decision on those matters. I flag up to Members that, if they support "promote" in this instance, they are making a distinct difference between shared education, integrated education and Irish-medium education.

I also want to touch on the issue of whether the Bill allows me as Minister to undermine academic selection. Unfortunately, it does not. That is the truth of the matter, and that is to my regret but, I suspect, less to the regret of others in the House. However, I reluctantly welcome the fact that Mr Allister and Mr McCrea have now confirmed to the House that academic selection is to the disadvantage of those from a socially deprived and disadvantaged background. They have confirmed it from their own mouths today because they are opposed to the inclusion of, in clause 2, the term "socially disadvantaged". In their words, they claim that it will be to the detriment of grammar schools and to the detriment of academic selection.

I will never again have to prove to the House, or use any reference source other than the clear statement from those two gentlemen today, that academic selection is to the disadvantage of those from a socially disadvantaged background.

**Mr Allister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** They are terrified to include a clause in a Shared Education Bill that has nothing, unfortunately, to do with academic selection, but it is a fact, even though that would ensure that we break down barriers across our entire society and in our community, whether those are between people from different community backgrounds or different socio-economic backgrounds. Such is their irrational fear on the matter.

**Mr B McCrea:** Will the Minister give way? Will he give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** They have stood up today and confirmed the very fact —

**Mr Allister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr O'Dowd:** — that academic selection is to the disadvantage of those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

I will give way.

**Mr Allister:** Thank you. Academic selection has been an elevator for many people from very socially deprived backgrounds, so the positive proof of academic selection is that it lifts people. In deploying the argument that was used, it was deploying the Minister's approach, because it is his constant mantra that academic selection exacerbates the conflict between those who are socially deprived and those who are not. The challenge to the Minister, since that is his view against academic selection, and since the Bill ensconces that, is that he is being less than forthright in failing to acknowledge that it is a leg-up for the anti-selection campaign that he heads, because it embraces the very concept that lies at the heart of —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** Order, please. That is a very long intervention.

**Mr O'Dowd:** I caution the Member to watch his balance, because he is dancing on the head of a pin there. He knows quite well what he said in the debate earlier. Mr McCrea, who is looking to make an intervention, was on the airwaves only last week saying the exact same thing. His concern about the Shared Education Bill is that we would have groups from different socio-economic backgrounds sharing together and that that would be to the disadvantage — in his words — of the selective sector. Now that I have pointed out that they are confirming an argument that I have been using, they are trying

to change that terminology. They can do that if they wish, but it does not change what they have said and what they are on record as saying.

I will give way to the Member.

**Mr B McCrea:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. My point, Minister, which you do not appear either to accept or understand, is that you are entitled to bring forward legislation seeking the end of academic selection, if you wish to do so. What you are not entitled to do, and what I worry about in the Bill, is to do that in an underhand way. This is a Trojan Horse. Had you brought forward the Bill and not mentioned those who are experiencing socio-economic deprivation, I would have followed your argument. This legislation is supposed to be about shared education. However, it gives you an open door to fund whatever you want, and I am just putting it to you here that, if you think that the Bill is going through without scrutiny and challenge, you are wrong. This is not the right way in which to go about it. I will stand over my argument here, in a Committee or on the airwaves, because it is correct.

**Mr O'Dowd:** It is the Shared Education Bill, and I think that it is only right and proper that we have sharing across as many aspects of our community as possible, that we break down as many barriers in our community as possible and that we give as many young people in our community as possible different experiences and different opportunities to share those experiences.

Under current legislation, I can basically fund what I want, so that is a silly argument. Under current legislation, I can basically fund what I want — if we follow your pathway. Therefore, if I thought that funding on its own would end academic selection, I would have carried that out four and a half years ago, instead of waiting until the last six months of the term.

The Bill has absolutely nothing to do with academic selection.

It has everything to do with shared education, the four clauses in the Bill and the policy set out in Sharing Works, which was published earlier this year. Members may want to read more into it than there is. Members may wish to come up with all sorts of conspiracy theories, but they do not exist because the legislation will set the parameters of how I can work, and previous legislation sets out exactly what I can and cannot fund. So, none of this changes it

whatsoever. If we go off on that tangent, we will miss the opportunities that the Bill presents.

### 3.45 pm

During his contribution, Mr Rogers talked about the use of ICT. There is an opportunity for the usage of ICT in the programme, and some of the schemes that are already on the ground are using ICT, but it is vital that we have contact. I am not suggesting that Mr Rogers is saying this, but we do not want to turn this into sharing through Skype. We want young people engaging with each other, meeting each other, being taught the curriculum together, learning about each other's experiences together and learning about each other from each other. ICT will play a part in that. It will not be the lead role in it, but it has a role to play going into the future in all aspects of our education system.

Mrs Overend, who, I understand, had to leave the Chamber for personal reasons, provided commentary and set out the position of the Ulster Unionist Party around the Bill, expanding it into a vision of the future of a single education system. I may not agree with everything that she has said, but if the Ulster Unionist Party has a vision of a single education system, let us see it. Let us see how we protect the rights and entitlements of individuals, communities and people from different religious, community and cultural backgrounds and how we protect people's British and Irish identity, all within that education system.

There has been much talk over a number of years that people would like to see a single education system. I would like to see more meat on the bones around exactly what that proposal means. I do not think that anybody should be fearful of the debate, but there has to be a debate about it. A single education system may mean different things to the various parties around this Chamber, but, unless we debate it, we will not find common ground on it.

I have touched on Mr Lunn's comments around various matters. In my approach to integrated education, I was accused by Mr Kennedy of favouring integrated education over the controlled sector and doing damage to the controlled sector in various areas through another conspiracy that I am involved in, as well as the academic conspiracy, which is going on in that corner over there. He used the example of Omagh. He said that I refused to approve an expansion of integrated education in Omagh because it would damage the maintained sector. I will give Mr Kennedy a piece of advice. Never, ever believe your own

propaganda because you end up coming out with statements that are completely wrong.

One of the reasons why an expansion of integrated education in Omagh was turned down was not because it would have a detrimental impact on the maintained sector but because it would have had a detrimental impact on the controlled sector. So, I carried out an action that was the complete opposite of what you accused me of. I do not know whether you want to intervene and withdraw your remark or you want it to stay on the record, but it is factually inaccurate. You have a habit of coming into the Chamber and making comments about what I am up to and none of them ever stacks up. In this instance, the record will show, the reports on which I based my decision around Omagh will show and, I have no doubt, the upcoming court case that is proceeding around that decision will also show exactly why that decision was made, and the judge will decide whether my decision was based on reasonable arguments moving forward.

The Second Stage of any Bill is always that moment in time when Members will have different views on the direction of travel of a Bill. Some will reject it outright, and some will decide to give it a fair wind and debate it through Committee Stage. Others may be happier with various clauses of the Bill than others. The Bill is very short, but, as I said in my opening remarks, it is very important for moving our education system and our society forward.

It is a much-debated subject. Mr Newton was correct when he said that shared education is a Programme for Government commitment. It is set out across three areas, and the Programme for Government put an onus and a responsibility on my Department to move shared education forward. This is yet another step in moving shared education forward. The policy was also another step in moving shared education forward.

I encourage Members to support the Second Stage of the Bill and to allow it to go through to Committee Stage and Consideration Stage. Mr McCallister said that he may have amendments etc. That is the way the system works. Let us ensure that, if we move the Bill forward, we do not miss the focus on what the shared education programme is about. It is about another step forward for our education system and for our society, and, if we work together on this, I believe that we can make significant gains for everyone without involving losers in the equation. I thank the Members.



*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Second Stage of the Shared Education Bill [NIA 66/11-16] be agreed.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** That concludes the Second Stage of the Shared Education Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Education.

## Private Members' Business

### Regional Economic Imbalance

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

**Mr Flanagan:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly expresses concern at the high levels of regional economic imbalance, as evidenced by high levels of long-term unemployment and economic inactivity in north and west Belfast, west of the Bann and along the border corridor; welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government 2011-15 to address regional imbalance, and the establishment of the ministerial subgroup on regional opportunities; recognises the role that the availability of property, skills, appropriate infrastructure and telecommunications can play in making areas magnets of attraction for investment; acknowledges the desire of local government, political, community and business leaders in areas of high unemployment to work in partnership with government to attract greater investment and prosperity; and calls for the inclusion of subregional job creation targets in the next Programme for Government.*

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht tábhachtach seo. I welcome that we are debating this issue once again. We debated it about two years ago, and progress has been slim to date. Hopefully, this motion will be the impetus for corrective action to resolve what has been a long-standing issue.

In 2014-15, almost 40% of the jobs that were promoted with Invest NI support were in the Belfast City Council area, with two thirds of all the jobs promoted being east of the Bann. That is not reflective of the overall economic output

in this region or the location of our people, as only 18% of the North's population actually lives in the Belfast City Council area. It is forcing the displacement of our people to already overcrowded, overpriced and under pressure urban communities, and that leaves our rural areas like ghost towns that are struggling for viability and sustainability.

It is not a new policy, but it has worsened as a result of the changing economic conditions in recent years and the switch to focusing on attracting jobs in the service sector as opposed to the manufacturing sector. Jobs in the manufacturing sector were more likely to be based in rural communities as a result of the comparatively cheaper price of land and the availability of space as well as a range of other issues. It is also partly the legacy of decades of deliberate underinvestment in areas with large nationalist populations, as the majority of both government and private investment was directed, for both political and gerrymandering reasons, into already affluent unionist areas.

**Mr Campbell:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Flanagan:** I will not, Gregory, no.

A Fermanagh MLA held the position of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (ETI) Minister for nearly eight years, and the county was neglected just as much under that leadership as it was under direct rule. Two thousand people left Fermanagh last year, mainly to get work.

Many people think, and I am one, that it does not suit some unionist politicians for jobs to be created in areas with large nationalist populations, or along the border, as they are more likely to be filled by nationalists or, heaven forbid, by people who live across the border. Those mindsets remain to the fore in many unionist politicians.

**Mr Humphrey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Flanagan:** I will not, William, no.

It is convenient for unionist politicians that those 2,000 people, most of them young, are no longer in Fermanagh to vote, as the census and other figures point to a growing younger population from the nationalist community.

West of the Bann and along the border are the areas with the worst road and rail networks, telecoms infrastructure, sewerage, water and electricity grid services. There is also inadequate provision of social and affordable housing and an absence of higher education

provision for the most part, despite there being a sufficient population on both sides of the border to sustain such services.

Regardless, with the inability or refusal of successive ETI Ministers to address the growing problem of uncompetitive energy prices for intensive users, Invest NI openly admits that it does not even bother trying to attract manufacturing companies any more. So, we are left with call centres and other service centre jobs, which are invariably based in large urban areas.

It would be wrong of me not to welcome the recent announcement of 800 jobs in a call centre in Enniskillen, jobs that will pay below the living wage. However, jobs of that nature will not bring our people home.

A report for the Scottish Executive last year indicated that the North does well in attracting inward investment but that it tends to be lower-value inward investment. Invest NI has seen record performance in the greater Belfast area but that is not shared across the North.

Recently published Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures on the number of workers being paid below the living wage revealed that our three council areas with the highest number of workers being paid below the living wage are the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council, with 39.9%; Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, with 38.9%; and Mid Ulster District Council with 37.4%. Over 200,000 workers here — or 28% — are paid below the living wage, far higher than any region in Britain.

A recent OECD report on the border region found that the North:

*"remains relatively more peripheral with respect to its political influence".*

If the North is already on the periphery as a result of the emanation of economic policies from London, imagine how much more peripheral areas west of the Bann and along the border corridor are. The threatened withdrawal from the European Union would only worsen this as any existing opportunities for cross-border cooperation and harmonisation using EU mechanisms would be removed.

Official statistics for disposable income, low pay, levels of economic inactivity and long-term unemployment are also comparably worse in peripheral areas such as Fermanagh and Omagh, Derry and Strabane, and the Causeway Coast and glens. While our overall

unemployment rate is falling steadily, it is remaining steady for long-term unemployment.

Some Members may well rise to deny once more that a problem exists, even Members who left Fermanagh many years ago to get a job in the greater Belfast area. There was a commitment in the Programme for Government 2011-15 to address regional imbalance.

The establishment of the ministerial subgroup on regional opportunities has done initial exploratory work on the Derry area. I would like to hear news about what it is actually doing and when we can see that group beginning to look at the specific challenges facing rural communities and how we can create employment for our citizens, particularly to stem the growing demographic changes in our society — the wholesale movement of people from rural to urban communities and the problems we face with emigration.

There has been much talk of a proposed reduction in corporation tax being the solution for our economic woes. Would a reduced rate of corporation tax address or compound the problem of regional disparity? We need to take informed, evidence-based decisions in that regard.

I witnessed the ETI Minister spoofing the Chamber last week about the need to set a date and rate for corporation tax, as if that were going to be the solution for the manufacturing crisis.

**Mr Bell (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can I ask you to rule on the word "spoofing", given that what I was saying was repeating what the deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness, told the Chamber of Commerce lunch in Belfast City Hall?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** I am happy to tell the Member that I do not rule on words. At the same time, I urge Members to show respect.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. So, the ETI Minister talks about corporation tax being the solution for the manufacturing crisis, as almost Pontius Pilate-like he washes his hands of the loss of 860 jobs. I am sure that his colleagues in north Antrim are grateful for this blissful ignorance as he runs around with his fingers in his ears ignoring the warnings that emanated from Michelin more than two years ago, that came from the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and

Investment for over two years and that have been coming from the trade union movement for several months, as he stood up and repeated ad nauseam his claim that a reduced rate of corporation tax was the solution for businesses that were not making a profit. At any stage —

**4.00 pm**

**Mr Bell:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I invite you to check the record. The foolish allegation — I know that it is difficult to work out which foolish comment I am talking about among the number that have been made — is that I said that corporation tax would be a solution for people of low profit. Will you check Hansard to see whether I have ever said that and, if not, rule against the Member? I said the same words as the deputy First Minister said. Is he spoofing as well?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** I will take that as an intervention rather than a point of order. I remind Members that there will be ample opportunity for them to make a contribution to the debate.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister never took his fingers out of his ears to assess the nonsense message that somebody had given him to parrot and parrot and parrot.

We live in a society with a two-tier economy. There is greater Belfast, and then there is everywhere else. Are we a regional Assembly for greater Belfast, or are we something else? It is time that we stepped up to the plate and dealt with areas that are not within the greater Belfast circle. We cannot allow the trend of a two-tier economy to continue. The golden circle around Belfast attracts the vast bulk of investment at the expense of other areas. I was not elected by the people of Fermanagh to stand idly by — nor were other Members — and allow another generation of our young people to be forced to flee the county in search of employment, whether in Belfast, Dublin, England, America, Canada or Australia. It is long past time for appropriate action to be taken to address this shameful trend. The number of workers from rural communities, particularly in the construction sector, who spend every Sunday evening or Monday morning sitting in an airport waiting to catch a flight to England for a week's work is a shameful indictment of our failure to create balanced subregional growth.

According to a new study by the TUC, the number of commuters who spend two hours or

more each day stuck behind the wheel or on public transport just getting to and from their workplaces soared to more than 47,000 people. The Minister stood up at Question Time and said that 40% of people work in a neighbouring constituency so we cannot set subregional job targets. That is the biggest load of nonsense that I ever heard. Just because somebody works somewhere else, why can you not have a target for Invest NI to support jobs in a particular area?

We need to take action to address the problem. The action that we need to take in the short term is to include concrete targets for the Executive and Invest NI for subregional job creation. That was a cross-party agreement in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's recent inquiry into the economy. Unless we take action, the same problem will persist. It should not be tolerated, particularly by those in the House who claim to want to rebalance our economy. Perhaps when they talk about rebalancing our economy, they are actually talking about cutting public expenditure. That is what that phrase means when some people use it. What rebalancing our economy should mean is facilitating balanced economic growth across the North. That should be our collective objective.

Putting in place subregional targets will not deter investment. No matter how many times we hear it, it is not true. It will simply focus the minds in Invest NI on the need to do more for the areas that have been neglected since the foundation of this state. Putting a target for performance in Invest NI is completely different from a quota. I am not advocating that we put a quota on the number of jobs that go to Belfast or any other area. I am merely asking that the Assembly, when it is considering items for the next Programme for Government, puts in targets for each area that Invest NI should work towards. That will not deter investment. It will change mindsets in Invest NI and, hopefully, in the private sector. I hope that Members are pragmatic enough to see that.

**Mr Dunne:** I welcome the opportunity to speak against the motion. Whilst there is no doubt that we continue to live in difficult financial conditions, which are seen all over the world, we have a lot going for us in Northern Ireland, with a highly skilled, educated population combined with our rich industrial and entrepreneurial heritage.

We cannot deny that there are regional economic imbalances across Northern Ireland. The figures show that some areas here suffer higher unemployment than others. That is not a

situation unique to this country. Naturally, there will be variations in economic activity in any country, and they are seen across the world.

**Mr Campbell:** I thank the Member for giving way. While he is on the subject of the regional disparities seen in various countries — he is right about that — does he agree that, given what the Member who moved the motion said about sectarianism, the people of Donegal, for example, in the Irish Republic were hardly discriminated against on grounds of sectarianism by their Government and yet they constantly complain about not getting jobs there?

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

**Mr Dunne:** I concur with the point that the honourable Member has made.

Such variations are due not least to geographical realities and the physical and infrastructure variances that exist across the Province. There are many issues: we need improved road access and broadband provision, and we need more energy to be provided from renewables through the use of gas etc. Although challenges exist, we see our economy continuing to recover from the global recession. In the year to September 2015, benefit queues shrank at their fastest rate in the past 15 years. Those are the most recent figures.

Much of the work to grow our economy has been led by Invest NI and the good work of our Enterprise Ministers, Arlene Foster and, more recently, Jonathan Bell. They must continue to make the growth of our economy the number one priority, as it is that of the Northern Ireland Executive. Look at the evidence from Invest NI for 2013-14. The figures that we have been given are that, in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, which was mentioned earlier, 637 jobs were created; in the Foyle area, there were 434; in Mid Ulster, 495; and in Newry and Armagh, 371. However, in my constituency, North Down, which suffers from its proximity to Belfast, only 128 jobs were created in 2013-14. The evidence confirms that a good spread of jobs is promoted and created outside the Belfast area.

Much of what the motion contains is already work in progress through the Executive's regional opportunities ministerial subgroup. That work is being done by the Department and Invest NI. Now that the 11 new councils are in

place, there is the opportunity for work to really get under way, through their new community planning powers and the levers now available to councils in partnership with Invest NI and central government to ensure that areas are tailored appropriately to attracting inward investment and job creation.

Despite the challenges to our economy, not least in the manufacturing sector, as, sadly, we have seen in recent days, there are growth areas, including the agrifood and tourism sectors. Many of the areas mentioned are areas of need, particularly those west of the Bann, but they have rich tourism potential and a thriving agrifood sector that must be fully exploited. The new councils must take a proactive approach in helping those areas by working in a joined-up way to set real and ambitious job creation targets.

We must all redouble our efforts to grow the private sector, rebalance the economy and get people into work. With a joined-up approach involving councils, schools, colleges and all agencies, we have an opportunity to continue the work of helping this country to grow and develop. The devolution of corporation tax, which has been mentioned many times in the Chamber, is another lever that would help to make this a more attractive place to do business and enable us to compete with the Republic of Ireland, mainland UK and, indeed, countries throughout Europe.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas le moltóir an rúin. I thank the supporters of the motion for introducing the matter into the Assembly.

While at one level this is an opportunity to speak on the motion, it is set in the context of difficult times. Only a week ago, Ballymena was devastated by the news of the closure of the Michelin plant, so soon after the JTI Gallaher announcement. It represents a significant blow to the local economy and to the Northern Ireland manufacturing industry. Indeed, Michelin had an impact on my constituency: people from that area were in the supply chain or worked there, as you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The manufacturing industry as a whole represents 10% of our employment. Following this disaster, it is even more pressing that the Assembly recognises not only the scale of the economic damage but the rippling effects that political instability has on the historic regional imbalance in the North. Of course, I recognise that regional imbalances and variations can be

a natural part of any economy, but, in Northern Ireland, the east/west divide remains as stark as ever, nearly 20 years after peace and much promise of a prosperity process — indeed, a peace dividend was much talked about. I remember hearing Gordon Brown talk regularly and frequently about it. There was plenty of talk but little delivery.

A failure to address serious skills and infrastructural deficits has squandered long-term strategies and crucial business regeneration. In Mid Ulster, we saw this at first hand, when the initial prospects for the Desertcreat project faltered significantly, before almost collapsing altogether. Fortunately, it has survived, so we hope, in reduced format, but I am very discouraged by the clear failure to invest in the infrastructure to ensure its long-term viability and the regeneration of the economies around it.

The figures we see reaffirm that regional inequalities haunt our economy. At this point they have become almost a cliché. Ards and North Down, for example, has the highest rates of employment and economic activity, at 73·8% and 76·2% respectively. That is in stark contrast to Derry and Strabane, which had the lowest levels of employment, at 56·6%, and the lowest level of economic activity, at 66·5%. Overall, long-term unemployment has remained at 68%, while economic inactivity remains in the upper margins, with 27·6% of 16- to 64-year-olds out of work and not actively searching for work. This confirms that, while some regions are doing well, the lack of opportunity across the North has continued to stifle employment progress.

While the above figures are a cause for concern, it is essential that we pick specific areas of weakness and areas that must see improvement if the economy is to prosper. It is vital that long-term initiatives, whether investing in the economy, infrastructure or skills, are targeted to rebalance our economy away from being primarily public sector towards more of a private sector base. Northern Ireland has shown an ability to attract large-scale investment, and we have seen many names come to the North in the past — fortunately for Belfast and east of the Bann but not so fortunately for west of the Bann. There is a litany of reasons for this, most notably the deficit of skills and, especially, the lack of infrastructure. Those of us who drive down either the M1 or the M2 motorways see a very obvious sign of that.

A skills base remains absolutely vital to the development of a competitive and healthy

economy, while allowing people personally to prosper. New skills open up opportunities and grant people the tools that they need to succeed. Indeed, in my constituency, some good employers cannot wait for government to do the job. They are re-skilling, taking in new people and training them themselves. Such employer-led initiatives among good firms, some of which I know very well, could probably give an example to government and to other sections of industry of how to do things efficiently. They rely on a skilled workforce not only to make a profit but to expand and grow into new regions. The Assembly can attract all the investment it wants, but, if we lack the long-term skills that are necessary, businesses will not want to stay. It will become unviable for them to do so. For example —

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

**Mr McGlone:** — I have referred to my constituency of Mid Ulster, where we have had good examples and some poor examples of figures —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** Sorry, the Member's time is really up.

4.15 pm

**Mr McGlone:** Sorry, have I finished, Mr Deputy Speaker?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** You are very definitely finished. [*Laughter.*]

**Mr McGlone:** I was only just getting warmed up there. I had not quite concluded, but I support the motion.

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** I welcome the opportunity to speak in a debate on the economy, even though, to be honest, a motion on the economy from Sinn Féin is like a motion on childcare from King Herod. However, there is nothing in the motion that I take great issue with, although I cannot avoid the fact that all the constituencies highlighted are areas where Sinn Féin is electorally strong. That is disappointing.

It seems somewhat late in the day to welcome a Programme for Government commitment at this stage of the mandate. A better question would be to ask whether the ministerial subgroup on regional opportunities has had any impact. The inclusion of a subregional job creation target is a reasonable ask, but, again, would it make a difference to the outcome?

As a representative of South Antrim, I want to praise my constituents for their relatively low levels of economic inactivity, but should those people now be penalised because of their work ethic? It must also be pointed out that many people in the east of the Province commute daily to our capital city of Belfast for their work. Those of us who live east of the Bann could easily complain about the lack of foreign direct investment and the lack of Invest NI-sponsored job creation.

One constituency not mentioned in the motion has just received a third hammer blow to its employment base: Ballymena in North Antrim is to lose 860 jobs with the closure of Michelin, which comes hot on the heels of the closures of JTI and Pattons. Many in my constituency will suffer because of those job losses. That high number of job losses will only kick in next year, but they are indicators of what I believe to be a crisis in local manufacturing. There is concern about manufacturing as the sector is exposed to wider global economic slowdown. Last month, manufacturing output growth was flat, and manufacturing employment fell for the second consecutive month in October, which is the fastest rate of decline since June 2013. It is not a positive situation.

Northern Ireland is a small place, and we need to think of the overall economic picture. In May 2007, Northern Ireland had an unemployment rate of 3.7%, which was lower than the UK average of 5.4% and of the Republic's 4.1%. In that month, the Executive were re-established under the leadership of DUP/Sinn Féin. Today, our unemployment rate is 6% while the UK average has returned to 5.4%, as it was before the financial crash. Even more worrying is the fact that 27.6% of our population is deemed to be economically inactive. It was 27% in 2007. At the same time, we know that, overall, one in nine of our population is in receipt of disability living allowance. That compares to one in 20 in England. We also have black spots: I believe that it is one in five in west Belfast.

That is not a record that the Executive or the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment should be proud of. I hope that he thinks about the statements that he made earlier and that he thinks about himself having no concern about manufacturing so that I can pass on his real concerns to the many in South Antrim —

**Mr Bell:** Mr Deputy Speaker, on a point of order. At no stage in this House — the Hansard report will reflect it, and you can check the comments that I made earlier and the lie that has been told — did I say that I had no

concern for manufacturing. Can that be addressed?

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker, but without the Hansard report in front of me, I cannot qualify that, but a very positive picture —

**Mr Bell:** Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, the Member has taken words that I did not say and attributed them to me today, so can you reflect on what I said in Hansard, respond to the Member and strike what he said from the record?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** I suggest to the Minister that he has now corrected the record. We can certainly look at Hansard.

**Mr Nesbitt:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will you reflect on the Minister's statement and his use of the word "lie"?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** I have already said that I do not rule on words, but I have asked Members to show courtesy to and consideration for other Members. I hope that that is taken seriously.

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** I was reflecting only on what I thought was a very positive message coming through at Question Time earlier on the manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland. I do not share that positive message. I do not think that the 860 people from Michelin would share that positive message. I do not think that those from JTI or Patton, or many hundreds of my constituents in South Antrim, would share that positive message. I am only asking whether the Minister will reflect on that. I have grave concerns for manufacturing —

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

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** — in Northern Ireland. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Lunn:** I must say that I did not expect the debate to be quite so feisty, but there we are. I want to start off by speaking about the way in which Mr Flanagan introduced the motion. He made the point that two thirds of Invest NI-produced jobs are east of the Bann. Although I acknowledge that I would like to see a more even distribution of those jobs, where does he think that the population, connectivity, and so on, are?

**Mr Flanagan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lunn:** In a minute. You might want to intervene again if I do not.

He also made a political argument. What he effectively said was that a Fermanagh MLA acting as Minister of Enterprise actually sought to divert jobs from Fermanagh to other areas for political reasons. I know that he has a fond relationship with Mrs Foster, but, really, that is outrageous. I am very surprised by that. If you want to intervene now, I will let you. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Flanagan:** I thank the Member for giving way. I am going to answer his first question, which is what I wanted to intervene about. Some 40% of the jobs went into the Belfast City Council area, which has 18% of the population, so Belfast is certainly doing better than its population would lead you to believe.

Regarding your other comment, I did not specify any one individual as being behind it. I said that it is a mindset among unionist politicians, but if the perception that the Member has is that I was alleging that the former Enterprise Minister was doing that, that is regrettable.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** I am pleased to say that the Member has an additional minute, but there is something else that I wish to say. Lest the Chair be totally ignored, I ask Members to make references through the Chair, please.

**Mr Lunn:** To clarify, my understanding of what Mr Flanagan said was that the Minister who had been in post for about eight years was making those decisions.

**Mr I McCrea:** That is definitely what he said.

**Mr Lunn:** Well, there we are. I will get back to the motion. It is a rambling kind of motion. I think that I am able to say that I will be the first to mention north and west Belfast. It is not a Fermanagh motion. It expresses concern at the:

*"high levels of regional economic imbalance ... in north and west Belfast, west of the Bann and along the border corridor".*

That is fair enough, but I think that the problems in north and west Belfast are every bit as bad as the problems in Fermanagh and along the border corridor — not the whole border corridor, but certain sections of it — and for different reasons, because the connectivity, transportation links, and so on, are better. That is part of the problem for the border areas.

I want to take up the question of the establishment of the ministerial subgroup on regional opportunities, because, as far as I can tell, and I think that Mr Dunne mentioned it, that body appears to have been established early this year — January is the date that I see — and met once. Somebody can correct me if I am wrong, but it has met once. It will soon be a year old. There was a freedom of information request submitted looking for the minutes of the meeting that did take place. I have seen a picture of the meeting, but I have not seen any outcome or progress report. I think that I saw a reference to the fact that Mr Durkan could not be there, for perfectly sound reasons. How long does it take something such as that to be set up and produce some actions, ambitions or targets?

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Member for giving way. To give some clarification: the group met twice. The second meeting comprised, I think, OFMDFM and the Minister for Employment and Learning. No other Ministers were available for that, despite my insistence that the Minister for Regional Development should be at those meetings, should be invited to those meetings and that none of those meetings should take place in his absence. Would the Member agree with me that it is more of a wasted opportunities group than a regional opportunities group?

**Mr Lunn:** I am in enough trouble already, Mr Deputy Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I will not go there. However, the group met twice, the second time with only three Ministers, and has not produced any outcomes whatsoever. The word that Mr Durkan used is perhaps appropriate.

I want to deal with the meat of the motion, but it is only in the last line that it calls for:

*"the inclusion of subregional job creation targets in the next Programme for Government."*

Here are quotations from the last Programme for Government and economic strategy:

*"Balanced sub-regional growth: we will ensure that all sub regions are able to grow and prosper, whilst recognising the importance of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry as key drivers".*

*"In identifying our economic priorities, we realise that economic growth must create a fairer and more equitable society for all our citizens".*

*"Balanced sub-regional growth: we will ensure that all sub regions are able to grow and prosper;*

*Equality: we will ensure that no section of the community is left behind".*

On equality of opportunity, fairness, inclusion, the promotion of good relations and all the rest of it:

*"Our North/South and East/West links are important".*

It is already there in a document that is almost four years old. Frankly, I wonder how the inclusion of subregional targets would improve the situation.

We will not oppose the motion. It is open to question.

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

**Mr Lunn:** I doubt very much that, if somebody puts in targets, all of a sudden there will be a transformation in the situation. It will be interesting to hear what the Minister says about it.

**Mr Givan:** From the outset, it is clear that this is a party political motion and, actually, a very narrow party political motion for Sinn Féin in Fermanagh. Even within that, I think that it is more to allow the Member who proposed it to carve out a niche amongst his colleagues in Fermanagh. It is clear that it is being used for that purpose, and we can look at it through that lens. It is also clear that the Ulster Unionists will use it as a way to attack the DUP and Sinn Féin. Let us not point out that infrastructural road improvements are critical to developing any economy, and their Minister held that responsibility for four and a half years. So, the motion will be used in that way, and I want to try, as far as possible, to avoid that, but I think that I will need to respond to it in some way and talk about its general principles.

The argument that is being made by the Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone is not unique to Fermanagh. As someone who represents a constituency that is only seven miles away from Belfast, I know very well that my constituents feel that Lisburn is overlooked for Belfast investment. We do not need to go too far outside Belfast for people to feel that the investment is centralised there. Even within Belfast, and within political parties in Belfast, there is a view that it is east and south Belfast

where the focus is. I know — I looked it up — that the SDLP's Alex Attwood made it clear in response to jobs being lost in west Belfast. He said:

*"you do not put FDI into south and east Belfast but protect industrial sites in west Belfast". — [Official Report, Vol 102, No 4, p93, col 1].*

The SDLP's response to job losses in west Belfast was to say that we should not put any more money into south Belfast, which happens to have an SDLP Member of Parliament. It is an issue on which, even within parties, there will often be that kind of internal division, struggle for power and calls for investment to come into those constituencies.

In Fermanagh —

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Will the Member take a point?

**Mr Givan:** I will.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Since none of Mr Attwood's colleagues are rushing to his defence, it is important to say that he put it on record that he apologised for that statement. I am reiterating that for him.

**A Member:** You are very generous.

**Mr Givan:** I am sure that he will appreciate that.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** The Member has earned an extra minute for that.

**Mr Givan:** Thank you.

When we look at Mr Flanagan's track record, there was an opportunity for investment with Tamboran in Belcoo. He fought tooth and nail against it and did not want investment in his constituency when it came to that opportunity.

**4.30 pm**

You could say that Mr Flanagan was less than lukewarm about the G8 summit coming to Fermanagh, despite the global exposure that Fermanagh was going to get from that for tourism opportunities. It is fair to say that he was hostile to the G8 coming because of political ideology, and behind the motion is a political ideology driven on a Marxist theory that you can force investors to put their money in a particular area. That is not how the market works. As much as some may want it to be,



you cannot force private investors to put their money in particular areas.

What you can do, however, is try to create the right environment for that to happen. Mr Flanagan may want to look at his colleague Bronwyn McGahan, who organised a seminar in July for jobs to do with a rural business investment scheme. She encouraged people to come to Fermanagh and South Tyrone so that people will get jobs. She took, in my view, a more positive approach, as opposed to Mr Flanagan's approach of doing down the Ministers involved and demanding that you force people to come into an area. Maybe he should speak to his colleague and ask, "How can we create the right environment for this?"

A real opportunity exists for Mr Flanagan to put pressure on his own elected representatives on Fermanagh council, because the Assembly has increased, through the reform of local government, the opportunity for councils to be the economic drivers and to set targets. So, put the pressure where it should be, as I do in my constituency on Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. Put it on Fermanagh council by asking what it is going to do to get people to come into its area to create jobs. I have no doubt that Invest NI, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister and the deputy First Minister will get fully behind the efforts of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, from which the pressure and demand should rightly be coming. Let the council bring it forward, so that can happen.

Ultimately, these are commercially led decisions. However, let us create the right environment and context to attract businesses to all of our constituencies and do that in a positive way, not in the way that I believe Mr Flanagan wants, which is by setting specific targets to seek businesses to go into places where they will simply not go if it does not stack up for their bottom line. We need to recognise that that is how the market operates but shape the environment to attract them to our communities. I think that Mr Flanagan can learn, even from his colleagues, about how to go about doing that. Indeed, Mr Ó Muilleoir, a former Mayor of Belfast, may be able to help him on ways to be proactive and constructive on these issues rather than negative.

Finally, let us just dismiss this idea that, from the very foundation of the state, there has been discrimination against Fermanagh. That, to me, almost suggests that Arlene Foster announced 800 new jobs in Enniskillen because unionism took the seat back from Sinn Féin. Maybe Enniskillen got 800 jobs because Michelle

Gildernew lost her seat and unionists are back in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. It is a nonsense.

**Ms Fearon:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Member almost made it sound as though Marxist theory was a bad thing, but I will not get into that.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. As we have heard, economic imbalances are particularly evident west of the Bann, in unionist and nationalist communities in north and west Belfast, and along the border corridor, which will be the main focus of my remarks. It is important that we recognise levels of regional economic imbalance, and it is welcome that the Programme for Government commits to tackling this problem. However, we have to ask how effective the actions taken have been.

In 2010, 29.7% of the North's gross value added was in Belfast. In 2013, that had increased to 31.4%, which suggests a further concentration of economic activity in Belfast. The motion refers to the need for infrastructure and telecommunications, and I cannot stress enough how important it is that we ensure that broadband is available to everybody. In my own area of south Armagh, it is crazy that a local construction firm takes hours to download a simple tender document due to poor connections. So, it is important that we invest seriously in improving broadband provision and address "not spots" across the North.

People and businesses in the border corridor, including those in my area of Newry and Armagh, face a unique set of circumstances. The response to that must be tailored to those needs. The Minister should seriously consider the proposal of a border development zone. Historical lack of investment has ensured that the border region suffers higher levels of unemployment, emigration, deprivation and stunted economic growth.

Given the prevalence of the border in everyday life, solutions to this must be cross-border in nature.

The island-wide economy generates £3 billion annually, with significant potential for growth. There are already some cross-border initiatives that can be built upon. I believe that InterTradelreland must be supported in its work — and it has made such a difference in my area — as should Newry, Mourne and Down Council and Louth County Council's memorandum of understanding.

Targeted and sustained action over a period of time from both Governments, North and South, could make a real difference to the lives of citizens in the border region. However, these area-based initiatives will only go so far towards a solution. They play an important role but are incapable of transforming the local economy on their own. Areas are being given responsibility for economic development but not really the resources and policy levers required to deliver it. Basically, it is responsibility without power.

Initiatives that focus specifically on the disadvantaged area are important, but we must not ignore the operation of the mainstream economy, which is actually what produces and reproduces patterns of inequality. We need a new approach, and we need to focus on structural change that complements the targeted initiatives. We need fiscal powers so that we can deliver a transformation in economic policy and performance. A more progressive tax system, a living wage for all and a focus on the economic inequality between the rich and poor will go a long way to addressing regional imbalances that exist.

Encouraging as it is to see such interest in our economy from overseas, I think that caution must be given to a reliance on FDI over the growth of our indigenous SMEs, which have been the backbone of our local economy for some time. We have seen the indigenous sector in the South of Ireland almost being sacrificed to appease multinationals. I do not think that we cannot allow that to happen. Investing in local sustainable growth and innovative approaches will be key to a successful economy in the long run.

Focus must also be given to the types of jobs that we are creating in regions. We have a really highly skilled, young and talented workforce, who need opportunities to develop at home. The brain drain that politicians love to decry so much will not be solved by investing millions in call centres; they, among other things, are the cause of the brain drain.

I welcome the motion. I believe that subregional targets should be taken on board. Any steps taken to address regional imbalance in job creation must be outcome focused, and I hope to see a more collaborative approach to building our entire economy.

**Mr Girvan:** I oppose the motion. I appreciate that we look at Northern Ireland's economy as a whole. The phrase that everyone keeps using is this: a rising tide floats all boats. Money spent in Northern Ireland has a ripple effect, no matter where it is spent. I appreciate that there

might well be areas in Northern Ireland that seem to have been, for some reasons, whether geographical or other, excluded from opportunity for investment. I do not accept that that has been due to religious or political bias.

We live in a Province where you can travel from one side to the other in less than two hours. I had the opportunity to visit England recently, where I met people whose daily commute is three and a half hours to work and three and a half hours home. That is quite a bit out of their day, and that happens in certain areas of the south-east of England. Those people make a decision on that.

If you look at London, it has sucked the life out of some of the small areas around it. It has been the magnet for a lot of major industry and major business. The same has happened in Northern Ireland with Belfast. My colleague in South Antrim made reference to what goes on in our constituency. Many of our people commute to Belfast on a daily basis to work. I appreciate that Belfast has become the economic hub of Northern Ireland, and it is good that we have somewhere that has easy access to rail and road transport links, boats and air connectivity.

We have work to do on improving our infrastructure. There are areas where we need to improve infrastructure.

Half of my family live in the Fermanagh area — my mother is from Fermanagh — so I appreciate that there are difficulties in certain rural settings. However, a fund has been set up that is helping to deliver local economic development in rural communities through the local action groups (LAGs) that were set up through the Department that the party opposite's Minister has control of. They have the opportunity to deliver economic development in rural communities. Some areas have more money than others. South Antrim, which I represent, has a minuscule amount of money for its LAG this term compared with other areas, and that is simply because a large part of my area is classed as urban. As a consequence, it has not availed itself of as much money.

There are areas that we need to focus on and improve. We need to ensure that we get a fair crack of the whip. As far as inward investment, visits and opportunities for firms to come in are concerned, nobody goes out wilfully to discriminate or to ensure that they do not visit west of the Bann or west or north Belfast. My colleague from North Belfast will be only too glad to say that it is vital that one region of our

capital city is not excluded. It is important that we all get a fair crack of the whip. As far as I am concerned, people should not be brought here and told that they have to locate their business in Dungannon or Enniskillen. They will pick what they believe is the proper economic heartland that will best meet their purpose.

We have a job of work to do on infrastructure. However, I mentioned earlier that Northern Ireland is so small a country that we cannot say that we should try to ensure that we do not have jobs five miles down the road because the area that I represent will be excluded, which is somewhat petty. We have to see Northern Ireland as a whole —

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

**Mr Girvan:** — look at the big picture and ensure that we deliver for the whole Province.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I stand as a substitute for my colleague Sandra Overend, who has been called away for personal reasons. Hopefully, Mid Ulster's loss will be Strangford's gain over the next couple of minutes.

Economic inactivity in Northern Ireland stands at an astounding 27.6%. In other words, more than one in four of the working-age population is economically inactive. That is shocking in its own right. By way of benchmarking, it is many percentage points higher than the rate in the rest of the UK. It has also increased here in the last quarter, as it has in the last year. While a joint DETI/DEL strategy to tackle the issue was announced in April, it is fair to question the capacity of the Executive to deliver on such commitments.

It should also be argued that the time for joint DEL/DETI strategies has long gone. The Executive endorsed the recommendation of the independent review of economic policy that we should establish a single Department of the economy, but hey ho, that recommendation is only six years old and economic inactivity is only 27.6%, so why rush? The logic of a single Department is beyond dispute. I am glad that it may come eventually with the proposed restructuring of the Executive. However, that alone will not tackle economic inactivity. I make no apology for returning to the theme of mental health and well-being. There can be no doubt that poor mental health explains in a significant part why so many of our people are unable to enjoy the benefits — financial and psychological — of being economically active.

A successful strategy must be a cross-cutting one embedded in the next Programme for Government.

A week seldom passes without somebody challenging me to tell them what the Executive have done to create jobs in my constituency of Strangford. Down the years, we have taken big hits, not least in and around Newtownards and on the peninsula. However, there is hope, which can be turned into reality if there is a strategic approach to regional balance that recognises subregional strengths. I would like to illustrate two that are perfect for Strangford. One is agrifood: the produce from land and sea is of the highest international standard. As we know, the Comber potato enjoys protected geographical indication status, and agrifood companies such as Willowbrook Foods, Sparky Pac and Mash Direct, to name but three, seem to be in constant expansion mode, along with the likes of Pritchitts on the Kiltonga estate, which recently opened a world-class logistics facility. There is conglomeration potential for agrifood businesses in and around the peninsula, a potential that can currently be classified as truly limitless.

#### 4.45 pm

The other area is renewable energy. Strangford led the way with SeaGen, which was a world-leading experiment in tidal energy generation. It has spawned several other experiments of global significance, bringing a focus to the area. Draw a line from where SeaGen began, at the mouth of the lough, up to Newtownards, where the local regional college, SERC, has specialist units looking at applied energy research, and go onward to Queen's Island and the work that Harland and Wolff has been doing in the area of renewables, and you have an energy corridor that is ripe for development at a time when economists predict that thousands of new well-paid jobs are possible in that area.

In fairness, the motion notes key fundamentals that investors are looking for by way of skills and infrastructure. We must ensure that our young people leave formal education with the skills required by employers. If the Executive were serious about addressing regional economic imbalances, we would not be disinvesting in further and higher education as we are currently, with cuts to staff and student numbers that will have a detrimental impact on communities across Northern Ireland. We cannot expect sufficient jobs and investment if we do not, first, invest in the next generation workforce.

I can see the justification for subregional targets in the next Programme for Government, but there is no guarantee that they will be met. The Republic introduced regional targets for half of all investments to be located outside Dublin and Cork, but those targets were never met. It is my view that the focus of the next Programme for Government should be on improving our human and physical capital, investing properly in skills and infrastructure, and ensuring that, as a whole, we have an attractive location for investment and job creation, with recognition of the unique economic and physical characteristics of subregional areas of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Humphrey:** I oppose the motion. I was appalled at its narrow, party political and, indeed, sectarian nature. I was appalled, too, at how it was moved by the Member from Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The nature and way in which he did so did no service whatsoever to the people of west Belfast and north Belfast whom I represent. In fact, he took away from the point that, I think, he was trying to make. Funnily enough, he also failed to mention the investment made in the west of the Province, in the constituency of Foyle, and, indeed, the huge investment made in the city of Londonderry — and it is Londonderry.

It has been a bad week. We have lost 860 jobs. That is a hammer blow for people in Ballymena, in particular, and in the basin that surrounds that town in County Antrim. I took an interest in what the Minister said earlier about the work that he will do and the work that he will undertake with colleagues to try to ensure that employment and investment are brought to a town that has been deeply affected in the last year, as we all know.

Economic conditions continue to improve. Unemployment is down, the number of jobs has increased by 30,000 in three years, to March of this year, and growth in economic activity continues. We continue to witness growth in the rebalancing of the economy, which is essential, in the private sector, which is vital and, of course, in exports. It is essential that the Northern Ireland Executive continue to review, update and refocus their economic strategy for growth and rebalancing the economy. The target of improving Northern Ireland's economic growth, with a particular focus on export-led economic growth, is, I believe, key.

As Members will know, I am a Belfast Member. However, it is critical that the focus is on Northern Ireland, holistically. Belfast is a huge subregional economy in terms of its population,

commerce, tourism, transportation, industry and finance.

Belfast is a key economic driver. Investment, whether it be by local, regional or national government or the private sector, does not simply benefit the ratepayer and taxpayer in the city of Belfast. Those who work in the city, those who visit it, particularly those who stay overnight in the city's hotels, those who invest in it and those who live in its suburbs and satellite towns all benefit from investment in Belfast and its regional economy.

The rising tide, as Mr Girvan said, must lift all boats. This is consistent with DRD's regional development strategy and the independent review of economic policy. City and town centres should be recognised as catalysts for economic growth. In large towns and cities, that investment can vary significantly. Compare the investment that there has been in north Belfast with that in west Belfast or east Belfast. North Belfast has received significantly less investment, and I ask the Minister to address that when he replies to the House. The reality of investment in this city is that people need to be mobile. Therefore, the upgrade of transportation and infrastructural improvements to facilitate that mobility are key for our workforce.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Humphrey:** Yes, I will give way.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** I agree with the comment that the Member has just made about investment, but I would like to hear his views on the announcement this evening that the IT centre of CVS Caremark is to close with the loss of 70 jobs. It was my understanding that this was a firm that, last year, announced that it wanted to grow from 70 to 150 employees. I know that, in 2012 and 2014, Invest NI offered it grants — in excess of £725,000 last year. What are the Member's views on that? We have offers of investment, yet firms are still leaving.

**Mr Humphrey:** Obviously, I am very sad to hear about anyone losing their job. I am not over the detail that the Member has talked about, but I am sorry to hear about anyone losing their job. I am sure that the Minister may well touch on that when he comes to respond to the House.

To maximise growth and investment, we must have a clear, joined-up approach. For example, in tourism in Belfast, hotels, bars, restaurants, shops, retail, tourist attractions and of course

transportation are key. They represent thousands of jobs and hundreds of employers. The joined-up approach by Invest Northern Ireland and the new Tourism Northern Ireland are essential. The marketing and promotion of Northern Ireland are key. Belfast and Northern Ireland are dealing with a reputational and perceptual problem because of the Troubles and terrorism. One positive that has come out of a negative is the once-divisive issue of the cultural mix of our city. Diversity is now a positive. More than 50% of tourists who travel the world are cultural tourists. That positive is something that Belfast has exposed in its most positive way. The good relationship between Northern Ireland, the Government of the Irish Republic and the councils that straddle the border is positive and of benefit to the taxpayer in both jurisdictions. In economic growth, health, tourism, transportation and energy, it is positive. However, economic cooperation and benefit between the Northern Ireland —

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Humphrey:** — and Republic of Ireland economies can go only so far. Remember that IDA and Invest Northern Ireland will compete for inward investment across the globe, and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board will compete with Bórd Fáilte to get people to come and stay in Northern Ireland. I have much more to say, but I will conclude by saying that I oppose the motion.

**Mr Bell:** It has been an interesting debate for the most part. I welcome the opportunity to respond to a motion — I was going to say, "a motion that had been so ably proposed", but, if we compare the contribution of the first contributor with that of the second Sinn Féin Member, we see that the difference is chalk and cheese with regard to quality, content and ability. Northern Ireland's economic recovery is now well established. It is evidenced by the labour market. August witnessed a further fall of 1,100 in the number of people claiming unemployment benefit, which is now more —

**Mr Durkan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** Yes.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for that statistic. Whilst we certainly welcome a reduction in the number of people who are unemployed, does he have a corresponding figure for the number of people in employment? Has there been an increase in the number of people in employment?

**Mr Bell:** The figure that I will give the Member is from the last period from 1 April, which is 2,532. We have witnessed a further fall of 1,100 in the number of people claiming unemployment benefit — 24,000 below its previous peak. The economy has added 30,000 jobs since March 2012, a fact that seems to have escaped the Ulster Unionist Benches. I encourage them, please, to stop talking Northern Ireland down.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I note that he says that 30,000 jobs have been created since 2012: how many have been lost?

**Mr Bell:** The numbers that I have in front of me show that we have created 2,532 jobs. Externally, we have brought in 1,991 jobs, and locally we have brought in 541 jobs. It is my understanding that the number of jobs that we have created exceeds the number that we have lost. Can I say to the Member, "Please stop talking Northern Ireland down"? There is no advantage in talking Northern Ireland down. The business community that I speak to is asking me to help to build confidence in Northern Ireland. That is why we see the falls in unemployment of 1,100 that you did not mention; that is why we see the fall of 24,000 that you did not mention. I do not know whether it is just that you do not want to allow the DUP to take some credit for 30,000 jobs since March 2012. That, to a certain extent, is fair enough, but please do not damage Northern Ireland by talking its skills and its people down.

The proposer of the motion made a very direct attack on the previous Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I ask anybody out there who is prepared to listen and review the evidence to consider two things. Under her distinguished tenure, more jobs were created for Northern Ireland over a four-year period than had been created in Northern Ireland since we started to keep records. More jobs were created under Arlene Foster's leadership in four years than had ever been created before. There was more foreign direct investment on Arlene Foster's watch per head of our 1.82 million people than in any other part of the United Kingdom.

I heard Mr Cochrane-Watson. Having listened to Sir Reg Empey holding the DETI brief and now listening to Cochrane-Watson do damage to the economics of Northern Ireland, I think, "How are the mighty fallen". He fails to understand the critical points. To be fair to Danny Kennedy, he was part of the Ulster Unionist/Sinn Féin Executive that they keep referring to for many years before they dropped

out before the election only to retake the post after the election. Of course, having dropped out of the Executive, had my colleague Michelle McIlveen not taken the post, the Ulster Unionists would have given Northern Ireland its first nationalist majority in the Executive. Good luck trying to sell that one on the doors to unionists. I say to Mr Cochrane-Watson that, at a time when we are creating more jobs than Northern Ireland has ever created, with the net number of jobs created being 29,520, that is the time for serious politics to talk Northern Ireland up. Now is not the time for the economics of Oliver Hardy.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. As a member of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee, I can assure the Minister that — colleagues from across the House will bear this out — when business people, business organisations and investors come before the Committee, the message is consistently the same: there needs to be political stability in Northern Ireland for people to come and invest. Indeed, we heard that again only this morning.

**Mr Bell:** The Member makes his point very well. We will get onto the meat of the discussion, but there is one final thing to say. Mr Cochrane-Watson could learn a little from Mr Nesbitt, who was able to make his way through a constituency that we share and show all the successes. Unfortunately, Mr Cochrane-Watson does not appear to know what is happening in RLC or Schrader or what is happening with the hundreds of new jobs in Randox. He does not appear to know what is happening with Moy Park. All of that has a direct impact —

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** Yes.

**5.00 pm**

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** I remind the Minister of what is happening in Ballymena in North Antrim that is having a massive effect on my constituency. I estimate that there could be upwards of around 500 job losses from JTI and Michelin, as well as the impact that there has already been from Patton. I want to remind the Minister of that while he is wanting to remind me of what is happening in South Antrim.

**Mr Bell:** I think that people will justifiably ask why the Member for South Antrim is so ignorant of the hundreds of new jobs in Randox. Why is

the Member for South Antrim so ignorant about the world-beating technology of Schrader? Why is the Member for South Antrim so ignorant about the jobs that are provided to people in South Antrim by Moy Park, where there is some of the best technology and the safest food anywhere in the world? Why is the Member for South Antrim so ignorant of the huge profits that are made by Wrightbus? People will not understand that level of ignorance of the constituency and of the economy.

There is positive news coming from all our main sectors. The construction sector has been our sector most impacted on during the downturn. It posted its highest growth output in three years. The service sector's output and number of jobs has grown. Service-sector job levels are now above their previous peak from 2008. Despite the recent bad news about Michelin, I say to Members who would seek to grandstand politically for their own narrow, sectional interests about Michelin, listen to what the company said. It said that there was nothing more that Invest Northern Ireland or DETI could have done. We faced a reduction in the market of five million truck tyres and competition from Asia caused by fluctuation in the euro. The company said that there was nothing more that could be done, and Unite the Union is on record as saying that there was nothing more that government could have done to save that particular factory. When people ignorantly speak of hands on ears, or when they make up and fantasise words that I never said, I challenge them to come with me on a journey —

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** You have given us enough nonsense already.

Come with me on a journey, a journey that will lead us to 30,000 new jobs in Northern Ireland.

I am sure that the deputy First Minister, when he has a chance to review the Mr Flanagan's comments on corporation tax, will be embarrassed to say the least, given that he as deputy First Minister stood on a platform in Belfast with me as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment calling for corporation tax to be devolved to Northern Ireland. I have to say that the Speaker previously referred to Mr Flanagan as behaving like a child. His contribution this afternoon leads me not to depart from Mr McLaughlin's words, because it was the economics of a child.

Northern Ireland has a unique opportunity to create 30,000 new jobs. Those are not my words but those of the Economic Policy Centre.

**Mr Flanagan:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He is getting very personal in his remarks. He makes these comments that what was said about the 30,000 jobs are not his words. If they are not your words, come up with some of your own, because they are the only solutions that you are offering, Minister. What have you got for the energy crisis? What have you got for regional disparity? What have you got for the growing cost-of-living crisis? You have not got anything. All that you have got is corporation tax, and that is not the solution to the problems that we face here and now.

**Mr Bell:** The words on corporation tax were the words of the deputy First Minister, which you are contradicting. Further to that, when I was saying that they were not my words, I was going to tell you that they are the words of Professor Neil Gibson of the Economic Policy Centre at Ulster University. He is rated in the top three economists in Northern Ireland. Is anybody in Northern Ireland going to listen to Mr Flanagan, or will people listen to the Economic Policy Centre at Ulster University? Of course regional disparities exist. They exist in all countries. They exist in London and in Dublin. In the UK, regional variations exist, despite, for the most part, economic and fiscal policies being identical. The Member put to me a direct challenge, asking what have we done on energy costs. I do not know where the Member has been. It has just been announced this week that Bombardier, from the manufacturing sector, has, as a result of what I led with in the House, got all the finance stacked now for a project of over £100 million that could lead to its energy costs being brought down by a full quarter.

Where have those Members been? Michelin was offered three quarters of a million pounds to do that.

**Mr Flanagan:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Bell:** Let me make more progress on the issue of the Province.

There are undoubtedly subregional differences, but let me tell the House clearly that I will fight for a job anywhere in Northern Ireland; I make no exception. I will certainly not tell somebody in Northern Ireland that, because we do not have a little target here, I am not going to take their investment; I am going to take the investment because, according to the census,

40% of people in Northern Ireland operate outside their parliamentary constituency. So, every job brought to Northern Ireland means that we are one step further on the road to economic recovery.

**Mr Durkan:** I thank the Minister for giving way. He referred to the regional disparities that exist in the UK. Has he looked at the tools that have been adopted or introduced to tackle those disparities, namely city deals? Does he see and accept the merits for a city deal to tackle the economic regional imbalance here, namely for Derry and the north-west?

**Mr Bell:** In terms of Londonderry, I have met the Member of Parliament for that area, and, as the Member will know, that is a matter between us. It is also a matter that is reserved in parts to the UK Government, and we will try to progress that. Again, I think that we should talk up the skills of Londonderry. When I came to office — just to name two — Metaverse Mod Squad created 100 jobs and OneSource Virtual created 289 jobs. So, progress is being made in Northern Ireland. There is no party political advantage in trying to talk Northern Ireland down.

What we have to do in the future is bring jobs directly to Northern Ireland. It is difficult, and I understand that people want to be near an airport. If somebody wants to come and invest in Belfast — I hope that Mr Ó Muilleoir refers to this when summing up — they will look at the success of areas such as south Belfast where jobs are accessible. I know that it is difficult to travel. I travelled for five years to a job in Omagh, but I travelled because there was a job there and I could take all the benefits from it.

So, while we will encourage people and will look in the round, we will never, ever say to a company, "Do not invest in Northern Ireland because that particular area has met its targets", because I do not want that company to go to Manchester or Liverpool; I want it in Northern Ireland. If it has to be Belfast, I want it in Belfast. Personally, I am with the Member who spoke earlier in wanting to have it in Strangford, but we want jobs in Northern Ireland.

What we need to do collectively is look at where we are at. We are creating more jobs than we ever created before. Under the Ulster Unionist and Sinn Féin Executive, which we were a part of, we set a Programme for Government, and that Programme for Government asked Invest Northern Ireland to create 25,000 jobs. That was the target set. Unusually, we have had a chance to reflect on where we are. It had a

target of 25,000, and it created 37,000. Foolish people who say, as Mr Flanagan did, "Only go for jobs above the private sector median average" have no idea that many young people in Fermanagh need to get on the job ladder and are not graduates. I make no apology for trying to get jobs for those people to get them on the employment ladder, given all the physical and mental health benefits that job creation can provide.

So, we will look to build across, but we will also ensure, in opposing the motion, that we attract investment to Northern Ireland and do nothing to deter it.

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm críoch a chur leis an díospóireacht seo.

I saw the former Minister, Arlene Foster, come in at one point. I think that she was here to pour oil on troubled waters, but she left fairly rapidly, perhaps to deal with more important issues at hand. It was the former Minister who referred to opportunities, rather than imbalances, when we addressed the issue of disparities. I think that that is the right approach. I note that, when my colleague Mr Flanagan put the case of why we are where we are, no one disputed that. All economies have imbalances and disparities, but the reasons here are historic, and they are because of the place that we have been.

The challenge for us is to move beyond that in the time ahead and to find a way — and I heard the frustration coming from Mr Durkan, who has just left us — to even out the prosperity to ensure that the peace dividend goes right across the jurisdiction. I suppose the burden of blame has to be carried by all of us that we have not made enough headway in ensuring that people right across the jurisdiction have enjoyed more of an economic uplift in the 20 years of peace, which Mr McGlone talked about.

My colleague Mr Dunne went in to bat for Invest NI, and good for him. He extolled the virtues of the great job that it has done. Of course, it was helped by some of the European rules at that time, but no one will dispute that it has done a stand-up job in bringing in jobs and selling the opportunities here. He also said something very pertinent. He said that tourism west of the Bann is totally undersold. I agree with that, and I think that we need to focus on that and concentrate on that. I will venture that, if you were to go to Donegal and see the Wild Atlantic Way, you would see that our colleagues south of the border are a little bit ahead of us. I see

the beauty of Fermanagh — if I am allowed to say that in front of my colleague, and I hope that he does not get too emotional — the beauty of the Fermanagh lakes and our inability to build a really prosperous, strong tourism industry around that is something that we need to examine and see how we can do better in the time ahead.

Mrs McKeivitt referred, in her intervention, to jobs lost again today. It is another hammer blow for another 100 people. CVS Caremark, a Boston company that received support from Invest NI, is closing up shop. That is a matter of regret, and our support should go to all those who have lost their jobs, and we should try and do what we can to find alternative employment or training for those people. It is important that that is mentioned today because, as Mr McGlone said, those are the difficult times that we live in, and it has been evidenced again and again. It is the misfortune of our current economy Minister that he has come in at a time when there has been a really bad run of job losses. It is incumbent on all of us to tackle that in the time ahead.

I thank Mr Cochrane-Watson, the Keynesian heavyweight of the Ulster Unionists, for coming here and educating us. *[Laughter.]* All we wanted you to do was build the A6. When we talk about imbalances, it is not all Invest NI and it is not all the Minister; every one of us and every Department — someone mentioned the Agriculture Department — has a role to play. All we wanted you to do was to build the bloody road to Derry — the A5 — and finish the A6 as well.

**Mr Beggs:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** I will not give way just yet. North Down has spoken, and I am going to get to North Down and Strangford now. The other fantasy project from Strangford was to have an energy corridor, and I look forward to seeing the budget proposition behind that energy corridor in Strangford and, in the time ahead, to seeing the Ulster Unionists argue within or without the Executive for the money to build the energy corridor that Mr Nesbitt spoke about.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ó Muilleoir:** Not just at the minute. I thought that I gave a fairly good summary. I want to move on to Mr Lunn. He made good points. I cannot understand why there is going to be a division on this motion. If subregional targets were an issue, it is something that we should have discussed before we came and



split the House and ended up in an acrimonious discussion today. Mr Lunn made the important point that perhaps there is more that unites us than divides us, especially when there are other matters and talks going on in this estate. He also asked how often the ministerial subgroup on regional opportunities meets. I think that is a fair question. Mr Durkan told us that it has met twice, but it has not met because of the difficult political times. It is our hope — and I think that Mr Lunn referred to this — that we can get back to work again and get the focus back again on trying to raise all the boats to try to ensure that the prosperity extends to all communities, and on all sides of peace lines in north and west Belfast in particular.

Mr Givan lamented the Belfast/Lisburn competition but accepted that Lisburn has its own strengths and that many people in Lisburn commute into Belfast. We all understand that there has to be mobility among our workforce. That is one of the reasons why we are encouraging young people to take opportunities as they arise. Mr Givan brought the issue back again to jobs. Regardless of our differences and regardless of the minutiae of the argument, jobs, growth and investment are what unites us.

#### 5.15 pm

Megan Fearon brought suggestions for new proposals to the table about a border economic development zone. We should look at that. In that context, the cutbacks to InterTradeIreland by both Governments worry us, but the Newry/Louth memorandum of understanding that she mentioned is an example of positive development. The Minister referred to that as well.

I am convinced that there are innovative and exemplary projects out there from which we can learn, such as, in particular, the North West Science Park in Derry and Letterkenny. I endorse what the Minister said about Metaverse Mod Squad and OneSource Virtual in Derry. We also need to put our money where our mouth is. We need these magnets of attraction, and, in that context, what has happened in Mr Humphrey's constituency — he mentioned North Belfast in particular — with the innovation centre at Forthriver is exactly the way we need to go. We need to make it as easy as possible for potential investors to go into areas where they perhaps have not gone before and where we have not seen as much investment. In that regard, we need to have the broadband problems that Ms Fearon referred to sorted out and we need to make sure that, as was referred to previously, during familiarisation visits, potential investors go everywhere. It is

one thing to say that we cannot force an investor to go into an area — of course we cannot — but we need to make sure that they get a proper introduction to every area.

I want to finish by agreeing with Mr Givan who, I think, referred to the new opportunity with 11 councils rather than 26. It is my view that this needs to be an era of partnership, and there is a possibility that we can have good news for all our people this week. We need to move away from division and pointing to one area doing better than another. The councils can lead the way, and Invest NI can have a real partnership with councils. We also need to have a partnership with councils that will lead to the type of jobs, investment and growth that the Minister spoke about in his closing remarks. I support the motion and have no doubt that, in the time ahead, around the Executive table and around every part of the Chamber, my colleagues will get a chance to talk out the opportunities that exist across the jurisdiction and how we will deliver on them.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** Too late.

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is a matter of accuracy. Reference was made to Schrader Electronics, which is a flagship company in my constituency and a huge success story for Northern Ireland. I do not want the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to be travelling the world and be ignorant of the fact that it is now called Sensata following the \$1 billion purchase in August 2014 and that it has been rebranded. As he comes to Antrim, he will see the sign. I do not want him to be ignorant of that.

**Mr Bell:** Further to that point of order, it was Schrader itself that informed me that it wants to create 241 jobs with the support of Invest Northern Ireland, and it was Schrader itself that said that it is delighted with the fact that it has created 301. You do not seem to know very much about your constituency.

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** You do not know the name of the company.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** Order, please. Could I bring this cosy little debate to an end?

*Question put.*

*The Assembly divided:*

Ayes 38; Noes 47.

## AYES

*Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Byrne, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Ms Hanna, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Ms Sugden.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Fearon and Mr Ó Muilleoir*

## NOES

*Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Cochrane-Watson, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Lyons, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Middleton, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Pengelly, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson*

*Question accordingly negated.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat):** Members will take their ease for a moment while we change the top Table.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

## Assembly Business

**Mr McGlone:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, during the debate around renewables, the Minister put on record and said that I had committed to a certain course of action during a meeting which I had with him on 2 July. That was erroneous, if not misleading. I have the full minute of that meeting with the Minister, which I can give to you, Mr Speaker, and I request that you check the accuracy of that minute, taken impartially by an Assembly official, with the comments made by the Minister, please.

**Mr Speaker:** I will have to consider carefully whether that is in fact the best approach but, until I have had that chance to reflect on it, I will be quite happy to receive the document. There has to be at least the possibility that this can be resolved between the officials of the scrutiny Committee of that Department and the Minister, on the basis of the records that they keep, so I just want to reflect on that. I recognise that the comments were made in the Chamber but, without the verbatim information in front of you, you can have disputes and different memories. Is there not another way of dealing with this issue that would be less —

**Mr McGlone:** I hope that there is not a clash of responsibilities. You were actually on the Committee at the time that this all went on, and you would have been privy to the briefings that were received. I suggest, Mr Speaker, that you please look at what is committed to Hansard today and the clear, impartial record of the meeting held with the Minister, and reflect on the correct course of action to be taken.

**Mr Speaker:** OK. Just lodge the document with me and allow me the opportunity to consider the circumstances and the appropriate way to respond. I was actually present during the exchange between the two of you, and at the time I wondered who would have the best recollection.

## Private Members' Business

### Transport Infrastructure Funding

**Mr Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 1 hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

**Mr Dallat:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly, mindful of the transport infrastructure in the north-west and conscious of the influence good transport infrastructure has in attracting new inward investment, asks that a special case be made to source the capital investment needed to complete the A5 cross-border project, the A6 dual carriageway, including the bypass for Dungiven, the final upgrade of the Belfast to Derry rail line that will ensure an hourly service, and the reopening of the Antrim to Portadown line to allow a direct service to Dublin.*

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this motion to the Assembly, and I welcome the new Minister for Regional Development. I appeal for cross-party support for what I believe is a non-contentious motion.

Northern Ireland has come a long way in the last few years. While political issues have dominated the Assembly, we in the SDLP believe that there is now an opportunity to begin the process of identifying the other issues that are preventing the whole region from rising on the tide of change. The north-west — indeed, the west in general — is less attractive to potential inward investors because of the poor transport infrastructure, which is a legacy issue that can never be fully addressed by yearly allocations from the Executive to the Departments responsible for capital investment in roads, railways, airports and, in the case of the north-west, the ferry service between Magilligan and Greencastle, which, I believe, should be the joint responsibility of the two Governments.

Those issues merit special attention and the collaborative support of the British and Irish Governments and the European Union. Above all, the issues require Members to look outside their immediate territory, irrespective of which party they belong to. In recent years, projects described as "shovel-ready" tended to be successful. While that enabled financial deadlines to be met to spend money, it did not address long-standing need. Indeed, the shovel-ready approach, I believe, compounded the problem of regional inequality in relation to road infrastructure, in particular.

Allow me to move on. Increasingly it is argued that Northern Ireland must become more focused on generating its own economic activity. I agree. I also accept that potential inward investors cannot be compelled to locate their industries in one particular area because it is economically and socially disadvantaged. That happened in the past, but, all too often, when the grants ran out the projects folded and the entrepreneurs moved on to another economically deprived part of the world. The option open to us as an Assembly, therefore, is to address the infrastructural issues, which are clearly identified as labelling a region as economically and socially disadvantaged. There is clear evidence that if transport infrastructure issues are tackled we can begin to address the causes of deprivation.

In the north-west, as I said at the beginning of my speech, the critical issue is the availability of decent road infrastructure to keep costs down when moving people, goods and, indeed,

services from the regions to the centre of commercial activity and the ports. We have had some success in recent years in rail transport, which constitutes a small but critical part of our transport infrastructure. Already we can measure the success of investment in the Belfast area railway, which is increasingly bringing prosperity, not just to Derry and beyond, but to the towns that the railway travels through. A few years ago, senior civil servants, egged on by direct rule Ministers, recommended the closure of the railway north of Ballymena. They almost got their way. Recently, the Assembly invested £46 million to complete the third phase of the improvements, critical to making the railway the success that I believe it will be.

That work is progressing and should encourage us to keep our hand on the tiller in what I believe has been the most exciting period in the development of rail transport over the past 100 years. When finished, the Belfast to Derry railway will be able to offer an hourly service between our two great cities, and that will be a major factor in enticing potential inward investors to locate in the North and in the north-west. It also fulfils the dream that that railway will, in the future, become part of an all-island rail network, as I believe that it will when the Antrim to Portadown section is reopened, enabling a more direct route to Dublin and the rest of Ireland.

However, rail is only a small part of the renaissance of transport in modern times. Road is critical, and, here, the two major projects that have dominated modern thinking are the A5 and A6, which are the main arteries to allow the free flow of people and goods to the various outlets on this island. The A5 is, of course, a joint project with the Government of the Republic, and I am delighted that it is dominating the current talks between the British and Irish Governments, as well as our own Assembly. I have confidence that those projects will happen, but time is not on our side. It is highly regrettable that the A5 is not well on the way to completion in order to enhance the north-west and make it a more attractive place to invest in, allowing it to expand and become a truly vibrant section of a thriving economy.

The A5 project has been on the books for many years, but not as long as the A6 project, and especially the bypass at Dungiven, which I believe is now in its fiftieth year of planning in one shape or another. I ask myself this question: for how much longer can this go on? How much longer can the people of that town tolerate the pollution, congestion and road safety issues that they live with day and daily?

However, the bypass is only part of the issue. Day and daily, sections of the existing roadway are little more than an elongated car park, where traffic is brought to a standstill as vehicles filter into the queues at various junctions in the struggle to get to Belfast and beyond.

Some time ago, when I was stuck in a traffic jam on the way from the airport to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, I said to myself, "Am I back home? Is this the daily traffic jam at Moneynick on the A6?". It really was home from home, but Kenya is a Third World country experiencing economic and political problems on a scale much worse than we have had to live with.

Other countries have faced much more formidable challenges to modernise and upgrade transport infrastructure than we have, including emerging economies in the expanded European Union. Take Slovenia, for example, which, within a few short years of independence, created a new road and rail infrastructure second to none, including massive tunnels that linked the country with neighbouring countries that it does business with. Today, Ljubljana is an important transport hub. There is no reason that Derry and the north-west cannot enjoy the same success as a modern economic entity. That must, of course, include road rail, air and sea transport. However, the area needs investment, and that investment needs to be prioritised, in recognition of the historical events that prevented it from getting the investment that it needed to progress and be taken out of the category of "area with the highest unemployment and social deprivation". It can and will happen, and the Assembly can make it happen if there is a will and a way.

We do not have to go to Slovenia. Travel to Galway and see living proof of what happens when money is invested in transport infrastructure. See the transformation that has taken place and experience how it is to travel from Galway to Dublin without seeing a single set of traffic lights. Indeed, I understand that you can now travel the whole way from Galway to Belfast without seeing a set of traffic lights.

Let us be positive and build on the obvious successes that have happened in recent years. Let us do it together, because, as I said, if Northern Ireland is to be economically successful, all areas must rise on the tide of success. Investment in new trains created the miracle that is now the Belfast to Derry railway, carrying more passengers than the highly successful Belfast to Dublin Enterprise.

We need more miracles, but it will take more than prayer. It will take the determination of the Assembly, pulling in the same direction and setting in motion a plan and strategy over several years to ensure that the renewal and development of roads and railways really happens. All of us in every party can be part of that success. If we do nothing, the north-west will never catch up, and that is not in the interests of everyone.

In conclusion, I ask all Members of the Assembly to unite before the motion and demonstrate to the outside world that, as an Assembly, we can and will make this place work.

**5.45 pm**

**Mr Clarke (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development):** I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate in my capacity as the Chair. I will add some comments towards the end in my own capacity.

I trust that it is in order to welcome the new Minister. I have been fortunate to attend one of her first ministerial functions today. I suppose the announcement of that will be next week in relation to the winter programme, and that was useful.

The Committee has consistently supported all four projects referred to in the motion. It was, after all, the Committee that put pressure on the previous Minister to bring forward the first phase of the Coleraine to Londonderry project in order for the City of Culture celebrations to be exploited to the fullest potential. We are thankful for that.

The A5 project has also been debated and has been subject to oral and written questions in the House on numerous occasions. It is also referred to at the Committee on frequent occasions by Members on the Benches opposite and, indeed, on these Benches. There is no division on it, or the A6, which is equally important to Members in the east of the Province and those who travel to Dungiven or Londonderry daily. The Committee has travelled to both those routes and has taken evidence from landowners and householders in Omagh — those in favour and those against. Again, there was an Executive commitment on the project. The economic climate in the Republic of Ireland and the judicial review in this jurisdiction have slowed that project considerably. However, as a Committee, we have also continued to liaise with counterparts in Dublin to ensure that the project is

progressed. It does, however, remain a commitment, as is frequently evidenced in the North/South ministerial meetings. I fully accept that there will be little progress on the project in what remains of this mandate. However, the Committee would encourage the new Executive, and, indeed, the new Committee for Infrastructure, to ensure that that remains firmly on the agenda.

The A6 has been debated over the last 40-odd years. Whilst I am not as old as the Member who moved the motion, I know that it has been about for a considerable time, so I do not think that we are going to see any resistance from the Committee in relation to that.

I will add a few remarks in my own right. I know that the Minister is relatively new in post and that she has taken the opportunity to meet, for example, the Quarry Products Association Northern Ireland on the value that it would put into new road projects. It is not only them. I am sure that other Members will speak about pet projects in their constituencies. That is why I am happy to join this one today — because the A6 is actually in my constituency, albeit that it joins a considerable road from Randalstown right up to Londonderry. The members of the Committee will know that I and others made representation when we were up in the port of Londonderry a few weeks ago about the significance and importance of that and how it would be useful for everyone to join that up.

In speaking about the quarry products, we have to recognise that there have been considerable job losses because of the reduction in the budget and what the Minister — and, indeed, the previous Minister — had to spend. I suppose the motion does seem somewhat aspirational in relation to the amount of money that it is actually going to take to deliver the projects that are outlined. I think, previously, we heard that from the M2 to Londonderry was costing in excess of £350 million. If we just focus on that one scheme alone, we are talking about a considerable amount of money. However, it would be foolish for any of us to say today that we do not want to see that project, or, indeed, any other project, whether in the east of the Province or the west of the Province. They all bear a certain degree of merit. I do not think that anyone should be disadvantaged just because they are from the west of the Province. Given that the Executive have previously made a commitment for those projects, I encourage the Minister and her Executive colleagues to do whatever they can to expedite those projects and get them delivered as soon as humanly possible.

However, dare I put a wee sting in at the last? I mean nothing personal against the proposer of the motion, he and I have grown very friendly over the last number of months — I do not know how — but it is ironic how much has been wasted on welfare, and his party is one of those that have held back on welfare reform. Some £214 million in welfare reform fines have been handed back to the British Treasury to date. Had we had that £214 million, we could have built the road from Randalstown to probably three quarters of the way to Dungiven; we would have had a road and something to show for it. We would have secured investment and jobs for the Quarry Products Association and its members. Instead, that Member's party and the other Members opposite decided to stand in the way of welfare and progress and hand back £214 million. I am glad that the motion is bringing forward a project that will deliver and continue to move Northern Ireland forward for everyone's prosperity.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I agree with some of the sentiments of the previous Member who spoke. I take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to her first debate and wish her well in the coming time.

I welcome the chance to debate the motion on infrastructure in the wider north-west area. I am glad that the A6 has been included in the motion, as it was omitted previously, and the Dungiven bypass, which I and many others have championed for many years. I do not want to rehearse all that has been said previously on that matter, but it has been a festering sore for locals and travellers alike in my town for some 50 years.

I also welcome the inclusion of the A5 and phases 2 and 3 of the upgrade of the Derry to Coleraine railway line. I am less certain about the reopening of the Antrim to Portadown line as a direct service to Dublin, and I often think that it might be preferable to examine reopening the Derry to Portadown line or to consider re-establishing the Derry to Sligo line, or the western arc as we like to call it, which would open up the entire rail network. I would also like to see a regular, year-round and adequately resourced ferry service on the Magilligan to Greencastle route.

The Committee for Regional Development recently visited Lisahally docks, and I certainly sensed a feeling by some that the railway line that runs through the docks may be a hindrance to the development of the docks instead of assisting the delivery of goods and services across the island. There is, of course, no stop, as yet, for passengers on the railway line at the

City of Derry airport and no halt for the new DARD headquarters at Ballykelly. Also, despite the success of the 212 bus service from Derry to Belfast and, indeed, the proposed introduction of a round-the-clock service, there is still no park-and-ride for nearly 35 miles of the route.

However, we are here to discuss funding. Much was made of the opportunities that were provided by the Trans-European Transport Network, or TEN-T. That might still be doable, and, of course, £14.3 million went from that into the Derry to Coleraine railway line. Our focus should be on other sources of funding. Europe wants to see balanced —

**Mr McCartney:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Yes, absolutely.

**Mr McCartney:** Would the Member agree with me that the north-west ministerial subgroup, which looks at regional disparities, would be a good vehicle to assist in the process of seeking out funding streams?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for his intervention. The ministerial subgroup has come forward with a number of proposals, and it absolutely is a good vehicle for identifying some of the European funding sources.

As I said, Europe wants to see balanced regional development. The Juncker investment plan is worth €315 billion. Most of the European regional development fund (ERDF) moneys go into INI, almost two thirds of them, and a regional approach is advocated but does not happen. The ERDF has a monitoring committee whose job is to ensure balanced regional development. We should pressurise that committee to ensure that its commitments are fulfilled. There is also the European economic and social committee (EESC).

Last year, a scoping exercise by NILGA identified opportunities for local authorities through European Investment Bank (EIB) loans. That would not be reinventing the wheel, because, ironically, the A6 road in England was funded by alternative sources and brought together the council areas of Cheshire, Manchester and Stockport. The issue for the Assembly is that it cannot draw down loans on investment from the European Investment Bank, but local authorities can. Joint applications are no longer required as a power

of competence, which means that local authorities could access those — the joint committee requirement is no longer needed. In effect, that means that a single council can apply for these. The former Minister, despite his flaws, was keen on this and he promised DRD buy-in. The EIB is also open to this. Certainly, guarantees must be given, perhaps under the UK guarantee scheme, but we need further political buy-in, and I welcome yesterday's intonations from the South on potentially funding infrastructure. However, we also require, of course, input from the Assembly, local councils and other source buy-ins. I again think of the ministerial subgroup there as well.

The Chair referred to the Quarry Products Association, and speaking on Radio Ulster's 'Inside Business' Gordon Best said that the maintenance of our road infrastructure, valued at £33 billion, was being carried out by default, through monitoring rounds that, unlike in the South and elsewhere, are not front-loaded and leave little in the way of wriggle room.

What do we need to do collectively? We need to build a case for transport infrastructure, particularly in the north-west. We need to look at the regional spread of the block grant spend. We need to ensure that the north-west is included as a priority in the Programme for Government. We need to challenge Departments, including DRD and DETI, on balanced regional development. We need to look actively at all alternative funding.

**Mr Cochrane-Watson:** Like other Members, I welcome the Minister to the House today. I also welcome the opportunity to talk to the motion, which our party is broadly supportive of.

We need a modern and sustainable economic infrastructure to support economic growth and help realise the visions we all have for the economy. Investment in areas such as transport, energy and telecoms etc will make a difference to a more vibrant economy, moving forward.

The positive relationship between a modern, sustainable economic infrastructure and economic growth is well established. The quality of the business environment, including transport infrastructure, has been identified as a significant factor, alongside issues such as access to markets, labour supply etc. With that in mind, we are very supportive of a railway investment prioritisation strategy. I am pleased that, under the themes, the number one priority is the completion of the Coleraine to Londonderry line and to establish a modern,

efficient railway service between Belfast and Londonderry and indeed Londonderry and Dublin. We very much welcome that.

Moving to the A6, I, like the Chair, my colleague from South Antrim, attended a Regional Development Committee meeting in Londonderry port. I am sure he would agree with me that driving conditions were horrendous on the evening we travelled along the A6. It really brought the issue of the A6 home to us, and we discussed the priority for the road at length that evening. I will just remind the House that more than 50 years ago, in 1964, the Northern Ireland Government announced plans to build a motorway from Belfast to Londonderry. Half a century on, we are still waiting. While the route east of the "city" of Randalstown is of motorway standard, the rest of the A6, as many of you know, is very much a single carriageway. So, we are very committed to seeing that upgraded. There are plans to upgrade further stretches between Belfast and Londonderry, but the most recent addition was the Toome bypass, and that took place over 10 years ago in my constituency of South Antrim.

We appreciate the need for the A5 to be upgraded. We are very concerned that £72 million, I believe, has already been spent on the project. I know that it has been a stop-start scenario. The promise of funding, which may be coming back again, and the court actions and so on, have caused stoppages to the project. However, again, we in the Ulster Unionist Party welcome greater connectivity between all parts of our Province. For me, in my constituency, there would be significant benefit, as my colleague Trevor Clarke identified for the A6; and there would be the enhanced railway links, not just to Belfast but to Crumlin, Lisburn and further afield to Portadown and Dublin.

We will be supporting the motion, but we highlight concerns. Capital expenditure is under a huge strain. Although this is deemed a priority, we also highlight the other priorities that are out there in the form of our schools, hospitals and other major public realm works.

Although we give a guarded welcome to the motion, we hope that it is not at the expense of other significant projects.

I echo the comments that have been heard in here today: had welfare reform been resolved, over £200 million would be available for these projects. I urge a resolution of that and urge that we move forward on the much-needed projects that were brought here by the proposer of the motion.

## 6.00 pm

**Mr Lunn:** I also welcome the Minister to her new post and wish her well.

I will say this for you, Mr Dallat: the motion is nothing if not ambitious. I have to agree with it because, if you are not ambitious, you will not realise ambitions.

I will deal with the Belfast-Londonderry train service first. It is not a service with which I am particularly familiar because I tend to drive, but the comparison with Slovenia or anywhere else on the Continent is correct: we are miles behind. The United Kingdom is miles behind countries that have far fewer resources and much less access to finance than us. I hope that that project will be completed sooner rather than later, because it is high time that it was.

The A6 project seems to have been going on for ever. I see it in different sections. It is a massively important road, but doing the whole upgrade is a massively ambitious project. A motorway from Belfast to Londonderry sounds terrific, and a cost of £350 million would not surprise me at all. There are real bottlenecks, including the Moneynick section, as we know it. I happened to listen to the radio traffic report today at 7.20 am, and the advice was to avoid the Moneynick Road. Apparently, it was absolutely chock-a-block and at a standstill before 7.30 am. For traffic management and speed of access, that is perhaps the most important section of the whole road, but it would not be good news for the people of Dungiven, who have been waiting, as somebody said, for close to 50 years since they were first promised a bypass. It is not purely a matter of traffic movement around Dungiven; there is also the question of pollution and the detrimental effect on the population. The last time that we debated this — it was not that long ago; about a year, I think — I came down in favour of Dungiven being first, if there was to be prioritisation.

The A5 intrigues me. Apparently, it is a priority project for Martin McGuinness. It is a stand-or-fall project, and the whole Assembly will collapse if we do not upgrade the A5. The section of the A4 from the end of the motorway to Ballygawley shows what can be done; it is fantastic. The main problem is from Ballygawley to Strabane, but the A5 also extends the other way, down to Aghnacloy. That is the reason for the Southern Government's interest in it: it is part of their overall strategy for an all-Ireland network. That is very laudable. I do not know the road, but I am told that the section to the south of

Aughnacloy is single carriageway. It is not as if they have brought the dual carriageway to the border and are waiting for us to do the rest. It would open up the north-west and Donegal, and I could not argue with that. I would love to see it done.

I am slightly intrigued by the reference in the motion to the reopening of the Antrim-Portadown line. As a native, I was not aware that there was an Antrim-Portadown line, so I presume that you must be talking about what I would call the Knockmore link, which is the line from Antrim that goes through Lisburn and into Belfast. If there is a proposal to change that route to make it easier for people coming from the north-west by train to link up to the Enterprise, I query whether it is worth the cost.

At the moment, they have to get to Belfast and then get on the Enterprise.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lunn:** Sure.

**Mr Clarke:** Is the Member saying that he would deny people in a constituency bordering his, such as those who live in Stoneyford, a good rail link? Would he also deny Belfast International Airport the opportunity to expand?

**Mr Lunn:** I was coming to the Belfast International Airport, but thanks for the extra minute. I favour the reopening of the Knockmore link. Anybody who lives in Lisburn would say that that is a good idea because it was a good commuter line and could become busier than it was. I also favour a link to Aldergrove airport, which could be done quite easily. It would also be quite easy to provide a spur to the Maze, if anything is ever done at the Maze, of course. In the overall scheme of things, I fancy that that is probably bottom of the list.

There is nothing here to oppose. The new Minister hardly has her feet under the table, but I am sure that she has plenty of ideas. I would be interested to hear where her priority is. It is inconceivable that we will have the money in the next number of years to do all these projects, so is there any prioritisation in the scheme of things? If so, what is coming first and what is on the long finger?

Obviously, we will support the motion.

**Mr G Robinson:** I welcome the Minister to the debate. I speak for the motion, but I do so with the warning that the projects identified are

subject to the necessary funding being made available. I stress just how difficult a task the Minister and her officials have due to the financial implications that she has to grapple with. The welfare reform situation certainly has not helped the Minister's financial situation.

The projects in the motion are but a few of the infrastructure projects needed in the north-west. I add to the list the need for a dual carriageway from Coleraine to the Drones Road junction outside Ballymoney and from Coleraine to Londonderry, with an emphasis on the Gortcorbies climbing lane between Limavady and Coleraine. Those are also essential targets to aim for, but the finances have to be made available.

I certainly agree that the development of good transport infrastructure will be of immense benefit to the north-west in attracting inward investment. However, the reality is that this, too, is dependent on finances. I live in the real world and have to accept the limitations that come with being a realist. I am on record as saying in the House that I fully understand the need for the Dungiven bypass, for health reasons and to ease traffic congestion, even as a stand-alone scheme. My support for that has not changed. However, a climbing lane at Gortcorbies on the A37 would reduce travel times and accidents on the road between Limavady and Coleraine.

When it comes to the rail infrastructure in the north-west, I congratulate Translink on the work that it did recently and is still doing. It is easy to criticise, but a word of congratulation on concluding major capital projects is well deserved. There have been problems with the signalling on the Coleraine to Londonderry line. Commuters acknowledge that, but we should all concentrate on bringing the signal upgrade to a successful conclusion. The hourly service proposed by Translink will be welcomed by commuters. The Minister will not be surprised to learn that I still support the establishment of a rail halt adjacent to Shackleton barracks to aid commuters to the new DARD headquarters at Ballykelly. However, I am aware that there would be a substantial and unwelcome budget implication for the Department. Ideally, that project should be shared by other Departments, such as DARD.

I note the reference in the motion to the Antrim to Portadown railway line. Of course, if that line were reopened, I would urge the establishment of a halt adjacent to Belfast International Airport, depending on funding being made available or in a joint venture with the international airport. It is a question of finance



being made available. What impact would that have on the existing Dublin services, especially considering the rebranding of the Enterprise rail service that is occurring?

I support the motion.

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I take the opportunity to commend the proposers of the motion and welcome the Minister to the House. I wish her well in her position.

At the outset, I express strong support for the motion, which proposes a focus on the north-west and the addressing of the infrastructure deficit that exists. Many projects have been referenced during the debate, but you will not be surprised that one of the key ones that many of my colleagues in west Tyrone and I are interested in is the development of the A5 dual carriageway. We have been engaging widely throughout the business community and civic society. It is an essential lifeline to the north-west. Indeed, the economic projections that were arrived at during the planning of the road indicate that it could generate as much as £1 billion for the economy. That includes hundreds of jobs but, most importantly, lives would be saved.

Following recent comments from the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, we need to see the commitment to funding for the A5 from the Irish Government, which was pledged in the Stormont House Agreement last Christmas, honoured. At that stage, they pledged £50 million. I note that comments were made yesterday by the Taoiseach that they will continue to honour that commitment. It is important that those commitments are kept in full. At this point, I also call on the Regional Development Minister to take a look at the A5 and move on towards issuing the draft orders, which would move the project on to the next stage.

As I said, throughout the course of the project we have engaged extensively with civic society, the chambers of commerce and businesspeople in Derry, Omagh, Strabane and through the whole of the north-west. They see the A5 as being the most important project for the development of the north-west. They have cited many examples of prospective inward investors who are unwilling to invest in the north-west because of the very poor infrastructure that we have there.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the inclusion of some of the infrastructure projects in the north-west

would be helped by their inclusion on the core network?

**Mr McAleer:** Yes, it is good that you mentioned that. A few weeks ago, we visited the Derry port, where we met the chief executive, Brian McGrath. We went along with the Regional Development Committee. That is certainly one of the issues that he raised. As the most peripheral port of the EU, it is not on the core network — nor indeed is the A5 or the A6. I was intrigued by how strategic the Derry port is. It is a gateway to Canada and North America. It handles £1 billion of trade every year, which is absolutely phenomenal, and it imports hundreds of thousands of tons of oil, coal and gas. In fact, there is a 10-acre coal yard on the site. It is also the key port of entry for plywood from China. The port in Derry is used to distribute all around Ireland and Britain. The chief executive made the point that the development of the A5 and the A6 is absolutely critical for the development of Derry port and the onward distribution of those supplies.

In the wider European context, Trevor Lunn and John Dallat made reference to the fact that we are miles behind many other EU countries. As we are, rightfully, debating this motion today, the implementation of the first phase of the core network within TEN-T is already taking place. That is coming out of a huge £200 billion budget for the 2014-2020 period. The objective is to have an integrated transport system across the EU to enable the seamless movement of people, services and goods. They want to have the core network established by 2030 and the comprehensive network established by 2050, with the objective of full coverage of the EU. Frustratingly, Derry city is not considered as a core node, and the routes leading to it are not considered part of the core network, so they are excluded from that £200 billion pot. That is very frustrating. DRD has told us that it has lobbied the European Commission intensively for that, but it is precluded, even though it is sitting at the junction of two EU member states and is the most peripheral area of the EU. We feel that it would be a major game changer if Derry city was considered as a core node. It would open the way for funding for the A5 and A6, and indeed the port, as part of the core network.

We have already seen that infrastructure is clearly linked to economic development. You would also expect that it is linked to deprivation.

**6.15 pm**

In the last year, I co-hosted a seminar with Trutz Haase, who was at the Committee as well. He worked for NISRA and is a very experienced and respected economic consultant. He produced deprivation measures for the island of Ireland based on the 2011 census and demonstrated clearly that where the motorway, the M1, was built in the North, there was a better spread of wealth along that corridor. He linked it clearly to the fact that the M1 was there. He has clearly linked deprivation with infrastructure.

Fifty years ago, a decision was made here to close the railway lines in counties Tyrone and Fermanagh; a crime against the people that left them very isolated. At that time, people hoped that they would see infrastructural development and that the M1 would hopefully reach that way, but that was not the case. We have it in our hands now to try to redress that historical infrastructural imbalance in the west and north-west.

**Mr Middleton:** I, too, welcome the Minister to her new role and wish her well. Of course, I thank her for taking time out recently to visit Foyle and meet constituents.

As a Londonderry man, I am all too aware of the transport infrastructure issues that we face, along with the thousands of others who use it daily. Whether it be the logjam at Dungiven or the bottleneck at Moneynick, the journey for commuters between Londonderry and Belfast is less than efficient, no matter what mode of transport you use. Of course, similar difficulties exist between Londonderry, Strabane, Omagh and Enniskillen.

We need to refocus our efforts on the importance of transport connectivity in Northern Ireland, particularly between the key cities. The delivery of the proposed road schemes will significantly enhance connectivity and shorten the duration of travel; it can therefore be shown to have clear economic worth. In particular, they address bottlenecks on those key strategic routes. In order to ensure that all areas of Northern Ireland contribute to and benefit from increased prosperity, it is essential that we invest in the wider regional transport network to enhance rural and urban connectivity. Of course, there are many benefits from that: the fact that the local economy will be improved by bringing workers and jobs together; improved access to markets and onward connectivity; and, of course, more reliable journey times as well.

In the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's report 'Opportunity for Excellence', Manufacturing NI recently highlighted:

*"a lack of integration between available space for businesses to locate and the transportation infrastructure."*

It commented that one manufacturer planned to double its space but was unwilling to locate to the north-west where space was available. That was clearly down to the poor road infrastructure. Of course, we know that it was not the only business in that position.

In relation to public transport and the rail service between Belfast and Londonderry, it is important to stress the role that it has to play in the economy and community in Northern Ireland. With a strong tourism offering in the north-west and two university campuses, public transport must be strengthened. Alongside this, I have highlighted on many occasions the case for the refurbishment of the old Waterside railway station.

With all that in mind, as was already touched on by a colleague, we must be mindful of the current situation that we find ourselves in, both financially and politically. The amount of money that has been wasted by the failure of the parties opposite to implement welfare reform was highlighted. It is mentioned in the motion that we want to see it as a priority or even made a special case. Many people will want to see other projects made special cases. Just this morning, I, along with colleagues, met the Rural Community Network about other challenges that face the north-west — broadband provision, connectivity and access to services as well. Of course, that is not to take away from the motion, as I am supportive of the schemes outlined in it. In particular, I would like to see progress on the A6 and the completion of the rail-line upgrade. I believe that, where appropriate, the schemes should be split into sections and carried out as and when money becomes available, whether it be secured through Westminster, Europe or indeed the Irish Government.

There is no doubt that we need to see further investment in the transport infrastructure. I know that the Minister will do all she can to progress those schemes as soon as possible.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I wish the Minister well in her new role and look forward to working with her in the Committee. She has been well introduced to the A5 and the A6, and I will mention the A4

extension to Enniskillen and beyond, just to put it on her radar.

As I was going home, I was listening to the programme that my colleague mentioned, 'Inside Business'; it was all about infrastructure. One statistic that stuck out for me was that the South of Ireland and Scotland have three times more road carriageway per head than we have here. Obviously, there are reasons for that, and there are legacy issues. Mr Dallat talked about travelling throughout the South of Ireland. I live fairly close to the border, and I know that we lag behind, particularly in the north-west and west of the Bann.

Gordon Best, from the Quarry Products Association, told the Committee that the A5 was a priority and said that it was dangerous. I do not travel on it very often, but we were going to a DRD meeting a number of weeks ago at night when it was wet and it was dangerous. I know that I am not used to it, but the next day we had our meeting at the port and, as my other colleague said, we spoke to the CEO, who gave us a presentation. I was surprised when he said that £1 billion in imports and exports came in and out of Derry. The two key routes for distribution are the A5 and the A6. Those two routes, which are not up to standard, have costs and act as a barrier to economic growth. There is increased congestion, longer travel times and higher costs. I experienced that on the way back to Fermanagh from Derry that day along the A5. I saw all the heavy goods vehicles coming back and forward from the port, particularly the Quinn Group lorries, of which there are 150 or 160. The lorries were being held up by long queues behind farming vehicles, and the time that it was taking them was too long. I spoke to drivers who said that they would rather go to Belfast twice in the same day than go to Derry once.

It is widely recognised that major benefits accrue to the economy through investment in infrastructure. Investment in the north-west and, indeed, west of the Bann is about balanced regional development. To be competitive in regional locations, business must have access to good infrastructure. I will not keep the House any longer tonight: I support the motion.

**Ms Hanna:** The motion is, in some ways, complementary to the motion that we discussed earlier this afternoon and seeks to expand on the same issues. It is clear from both debates that increased and improved transport infrastructure would go a lot of the way towards alleviating some of the imbalances for those outside Belfast who have to deal with it on a

daily basis. It is easy for us to get up and ask for funding for this, that and the other project, and I know that the budget is not in place to dole out money for everything, but these are not new requests. With respect, the welfare reform issue has been a problem for the last year but, particularly with regard to the Derry road, these are proposals that have been on the table for 50 years, and we did not necessarily have welfare reform as the block —

**Mr Clarke:** I thank the Member for giving way. You still wasted £214 million.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Ms Hanna:** I would like to take that as a commitment: it sounds like a deal on welfare reform is coming. It is above my pay grade, but, if you are saying that, once welfare reform is resolved, we will have money for this project, I will happily take that as a win.

It is clear that, if we do not invest in this infrastructure, we will be back to these issues in years to come. A balanced investment programme will mean that prosperity can, possibly, be spread out across Northern Ireland. Possibly, the foreign direct investment ship has sailed a little bit; we are probably quite late to that. I know that there was some discussion earlier, but attracting it has been a big part of the Executive's economic strategy. We will not be able to expand that if we do not address these issues. I am not seeking to undersell my city — it is an advantage that I represent the centre of the universe — but we have to realise that the devolution of corporation tax will only take us so far and that, if we do not join up the other dots and learn the other lessons from the Republic of investing in education and infrastructure as well, it will not make much of a difference.

A couple of Members have mentioned infrastructure down South. I am from Galway originally, and we moved to Belfast when I was a child. I am up and down multiple times a year, and, every time I am in Galway, I see the differences in the fortunes of my two home cities and how that region keeps getting economic and investment wins that we just do not get. Members who have taken that road from Dublin will pass Athenry, and anybody who is a follower of Irish rugby will know about Athenry and its low-lying fields. Athenry is about to be on the end of €850 million of investment from Apple. It is clear to see that it is not very near Dublin geographically, but it has got that because it is accessible from anywhere else on the island. We do not get

wins like that and will not get wins like that until we start to invest in the infrastructure. Even if Belfast were getting that number of quality jobs, we could not expect people from Fermanagh, Tyrone and Derry to compete on a level playing field for those jobs and be able to raise their families and stay with their families at home until we invest.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member accept that we are talking about the north-west of Ireland, which is Donegal, Derry and Tyrone, and that, given that the two Governments made this a priority in the St Andrews Agreement, the time has come for real delivery? We want to see evidence that this will happen to make sure that there is the economic development necessary in the north-west of the island, as, indeed, it will be complemented by the A6 going forward.

**Ms Hanna:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree entirely.

The Irish Government have indicated that they are putting the funding back on the table for the A5 in particular. That clearly shows that the ball is back in the Northern Ireland Executive's court to make that project happen. Equally important is the A6. As I said, we have discussed that for 50 years, and we all know the original plan of proper linkages from Belfast to Derry. As I understand it, this project has gone through all its statutory processes. A contractor is in place, and the only thing that is missing is money. Particularly for people in the north-west, it must rank as one of the major failures in devolution that, 15 years into the Assembly and the Ministry having been passed around various parties, that project has not advanced any.

There have been some positive announcements on railways, which is in part due to the lobbying of my colleague from East Derry. I am glad that that is back on track, although I believe that a cyclist recently beat the train from Belfast to Derry in an experiment where he decided to see whether he could do that. I do not think that that speaks very well about the quality of the railway. I understand that the Executive have committed £44 million per annum, but, in a 20-year plan, that will equate to £880 million of expenditure for rail, of which £620 million is required for maintenance. That would leave very little investment for trains.

I will wrap up by echoing the words of my colleagues. We have had a lot of good words, particularly about the A5 and A6, but it really is time for meaningful capital investment that will attract and facilitate the sort of 21st-century

jobs that we need all across the region and not just in Belfast.

**Mr Lyons:** I also take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to her new post, and I wish her well in it. I note with interest the motion before the House this evening, and I certainly cannot blame the Members for wanting to table the motion and say, "Here are the issues that we have in our constituency, and here is the infrastructure that we want to see to get them sorted". It is, of course, the season where children are beginning to write their letter to Santa, and that is possibly what we have here in front of us. It is a wish list, if you like, for the SDLP. I do not know whether the SDLP has been good or bad this year. Something has already been said on welfare reform, and perhaps the party leader will comment on that further; of course, I could not possibly comment. By my calculations, we have at least £1 billion of spending in the motion.

As I say, I cannot blame the Members for bringing that forward. Those are good projects that we want to see completed.

### 6.30 pm

From my perspective, we in East Antrim have been very fortunate during this mandate because we have had the construction of two long-awaited roads, the A8; and the A2. On Friday morning, I spoke to business leaders in Larne who said that it has been and will be of benefit to them. So, I certainly believe that it is good and right that we improve the road transport infrastructure throughout Northern Ireland. For those of you who want to try them out, please do so. I extend an invitation for you to visit Carrickfergus and Larne. You can get from Sandyknowes roundabout to Larne in 16 or 17 minutes, so why not take up that opportunity and see the road that we have? Perhaps you can visit the Gobbins or some of the other wonderful attractions on the way.

**Mr Dallat:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Lyons:** I am more than happy to give way to Mr Dallat.

**Mr Dallat:** I know that the Member is new to the Assembly, so I need to put on record that we did, in fact, go and see that wonderful new motorway, which cost, I think, £140 million for 14.5 miles. I did not see a lot of traffic on it, but I did admire the bypass round six houses. I said to myself, "My God, if the people of

Dungiven see this, they will go bananas".  
[Laughter.]

**Mr Lyons:** Of course, the bypass also goes round Ballynure, which I am sure the Member took note of. Traffic is flowing well on that road, and we are very pleased to have it. We are pleased to have the A2 to Carrickfergus as well. I am making the point that, yes, it is good for business and the economy. Of course we want to see the easy movement of goods and people. We want to have accessible services as well. We get jobs from construction. Good infrastructure is obviously a key component for businesses involved in FDI. It improves competitiveness and connectivity and helps with regeneration, economic productivity and all those other things. So, it is a very worthy desire to want to see more and better infrastructure in our country, and I am very supportive of that.

Issues about funding have obviously been raised already in the debate. The issue of welfare reform was raised, including the possible consequences that that may have on our overall Budget. I want to place it on the record that I very much believe that infrastructure is good for Northern Ireland and the economy. I do not think that many Members in here will disagree with that. I note the absence this evening of the Member for North Down Mr Agnew of the Green Party. Of course, at the last election, his manifesto stated that there would be a moratorium on all new road-building projects. I think that that is the wrong route to go down. If we want to build our economy and create more jobs, we need to have the necessary infrastructure in place. A lot of decisions will obviously be taken in the next mandate on those issues, and some projects may be prioritised over others. We have had good investment over the mandate, and I hope that that continues.

I have just one word of warning for Members in the House: this is not a silver bullet; it is not some perfect solution to all the problems. If we build the A6, it will not mean that the north-west becomes a great economic powerhouse overnight. Yes, it will help and, yes, it is important that we have that infrastructure, but let us be realistic at the same time.

**Mr Speaker:** It is my pleasure to welcome the Minister to the podium to respond to the debate.

**Miss M McIlveen (The Minister for Regional Development):** Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and

welcome this opportunity to speak on an issue of such importance.

As a member of the Executive, my job is to support and drive economic recovery across all parts of Northern Ireland. The motion rightly highlights the importance of transport infrastructure in that recovery. It is obvious from comments expressed this evening that all of us in the House recognise the need to invest in our economic infrastructure if we are to realise our shared ambition to transform our economy and society.

As was highlighted during the previous debate, our transport infrastructure needs to be fit for purpose to ensure that people, particularly in more remote areas west of the Bann, are in reach of available jobs and that the correct economic infrastructure is in place to enable the conditions through which economic growth can take place.

It is all too easy to take for granted the connections and opportunities that modern transport infrastructure provides not just in Northern Ireland but in an increasingly connected global community. It is those very connections that determine our economic potential. They connect our manufacturers and businesses to global markets, allow us to attract the talent and investment we need to transform our economy and provide access to employment, education and, indeed, the social opportunities our people and communities need to benefit from growth and realise their potential. That is why laying the foundations for a modern, efficient transport infrastructure in all parts of Northern Ireland will be my priority as Minister.

Investment in our transport infrastructure is a significant, long-term commitment and is one that lays the foundations for our future economic well-being. Investment decisions cannot be driven solely by a focus on the present and must enjoy wider Executive support if they are to survive beyond a single mandate. As the Chair of the Committee and Mr Ó hOisín have stated, there is also a need to provide greater certainty on our long-term funding priorities to the industry to provide it with the clarity it needs to plan, invest and build the skills required to deliver those schemes. There is a clear and immediate economic benefit here for our businesses, and we should not ignore that.

When considering our priorities for investment, we must take account of the realities and constraints that we face today. Equally, however, we must look forward. We must

anticipate and plan for the needs of our people and our economy not just today but in 10, 20, 30 years' time. In that context, the desirability of the schemes highlighted in the motion are not in question. We can be united on that. The challenge is one of affordability and prioritisation.

I will work hard to make the case for the Executive investing in a modern, efficient transport infrastructure across all parts of Northern Ireland, and I welcome support from across the House in making that case.

We all recognise the need to invest in the transport infrastructure in the north-west. However, these decisions cannot be taken in isolation; they must be part of a wider regional strategy.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank the Minister for giving way. When we talk about priorities, will she accept that, given the importance that the two Governments put on the A5 western transport corridor at St Andrews, and given that the Irish Government have put €50 million on account for two years, that is, 2014-15 and 2015-16, evidence now has to be demonstrated by the Executive that there will be forward movement to make sure that the rest of the money can be triggered so that the programme can proceed as envisaged?

**Miss M McIlveen:** I thank the Member for his intervention, and I will return to the issue around the A5.

If we focus solely on schemes or deal with the north-west in isolation, no matter how well intentioned that is, we run the very real risk of diminishing the impact of the investment we are likely to get. So, we cannot ignore the real needs for significant investment in our transport infrastructure elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

All successful regions have vibrant connected cities at their core. It is for that reason that the Programme for Government, the Executive's economic strategy and the regional development strategy all highlight the need to strengthen Londonderry as a principal city and driver for the north-west and Belfast as the regional economic driver.

Members have correctly identified the importance of key projects such as the A5 and A6 in unlocking the economic potential of Londonderry and, indeed, the wider north-west region. I visited those schemes recently, and I am satisfied that they are regionally significant schemes with all the associated benefits. However, in recognising the benefits of such

schemes, I am acutely aware of the concerns of local landowners particularly affected by the A5 scheme. I am aware that there are significant misgivings because of how they have been treated to date. I plan to engage with some of the agents representing those landowners to address the concerns of those affected.

Unfortunately, I cannot undo what was done before my time in office, but I can give an assurance that I will listen to concerns going forward during my tenure.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Will the Minister give way?

**Miss M McIlveen:** I have quite a bit to say, so, if you do not mind.

On the A6 corridor, two major projects are being developed: the Londonderry to Dungiven scheme and the Randalstown to Castledawson scheme.

A contract for Randalstown to Castledawson was awarded in May this year, and work is progressing on the first phase to develop the scheme to a shovel-ready position, which will allow construction to start at short notice when funding becomes available. The Londonderry to Dungiven scheme is also well advanced, and the draft vesting order was published in three parts to increase flexibility with construction and to allow options such as the building of the Dungiven bypass ahead of the remainder of the scheme. Equally, the delivery of the York Street interchange, the Belfast transport hub and, indeed, rapid transit have an essential role to play in Northern Ireland's economic future. In their absence, we run a very real risk of constraining our capacity for growth not just in Belfast but right across Northern Ireland. My challenge as Minister is to find an appropriate balance within the available funding envelope.

The need for investment, of course, is not and should not be limited to Belfast or Londonderry. As I stated, investment must be part of a wider and balanced regional strategy if our rural areas and major towns throughout Northern Ireland are to benefit from growth and attract business attention and investment. This year, £67 million has been allocated to develop and construct strategic road schemes. Most of that will be spent on the construction of the A31 Magherafelt bypass and the A26 Frosses Road dualling. In addition, that funding has also allowed my Department to complete the £130 million investment in the A8 Belfast to Larne dualling scheme and the £50 million A2 Shore Road dualling scheme at Jordanstown, and to develop a range of projects including new bypass proposals for Ballynahinch and

Enniskillen. The Enniskillen bypass will build on the £146 million upgrade of the A4 Dungannon to Ballygawley road. It is those more modest schemes that collectively provide the connections and local conditions that create attractive environments for people to live and work in. Alongside investment in public transport, they provide the links between our towns and rural areas, which are essential to building sustainable rural economies and communities. There is also the danger that we can lose sight of the importance of what might appear to be localised investment in the likes of crossings and footpaths. Those may not appear to have regional benefit, but they can make a huge difference to a local community, including its ability to access services and wider opportunities. We need, therefore, to continue to make adequate provision for those schemes.

I also welcome the opportunity today to set out my commitment to further investment in the rail network, including in the north-west. As was highlighted, significant progress has been made in recent years in upgrading the track between Belfast and Londonderry. I recently visited Bellarena to see for myself the progress that has been made on the current phase 2 Coleraine to Londonderry project, which, at a cost of nearly £46 million, will overhaul the antiquated signalling system and create a new passing loop by the end of next year. I agree with Mr Dallat that that is an exciting development. Alongside the development of a new rail station in Londonderry, there is an opportunity to continue the growth in passenger numbers and services that we have seen in recent years. More recently, our investment in the Londonderry line sends a strong signal to businesses and overseas investors of the Executive's strong commitment to the north-west. That capital investment will provide the infrastructure required to make an hourly service from Londonderry to Belfast possible. However, I need to emphasise that the actual delivery of the additional rail services involved would create a significant extra annual financial pressure on Translink. It is not apparent at this stage where that investment will come from.

The motion calls for the reopening of the Antrim to Portadown line to provide a direct rail link to Dublin and, indeed, to Belfast International Airport at Aldergrove. To answer Mr Lunn's question: the reopening of the line would require an investment of at least £50 million, and it is unlikely that the demand would exist to justify prioritising that level of funding in the immediate future. The number of passengers using Belfast International Airport is projected to reach 10 million per annum by 2030, and, at

that stage, it may be possible to make an economic case for reopening the line.

I firmly believe that we must have an ambitious programme of investment to build a modern, efficient transport infrastructure right across Northern Ireland, including in the north-west. However, it must be balanced. It cannot be to the benefit of one area and to the detriment of another. We also need to be realistic: while we can lay the foundations of that network today, it will require long-term investment stretching across a number of Budget periods. It is simply not affordable otherwise. The capital investment required to deliver the projects identified in this motion alone is greater than my Department's entire capital budget for the current Programme for Government mandate. It is for that reason, as I highlighted, that we need a collective agreement across the Executive on the prioritisation of investment in key transport infrastructure. The restructuring of Departments provides the opportunity to better coordinate our efforts and align key strategies. It is critical that we seize that opportunity.

#### 6.45 pm

Investment in transport will not, on its own, deliver growth or well-being. It must be aligned with efforts to enhance our skills base to attract businesses, tackle deprivation and build communities in urban and rural environments that are attractive places to live and work in order to ensure that they can compete for investment in a global economy.

No single Department can create the conditions for growth and prosperity. We need coordinated action from all sectors across the Executive and the wider public sector, including local government. I share the view of others in the House that the reform of local government and the community planning process provide us with a unique opportunity.

I am committed to improving the road and rail transport infrastructure in the north-west. I am committed to taking that forward as part of a balanced, regional strategy to deliver a modern, efficient transport infrastructure that unlocks the economic potential of all parts of Northern Ireland and enhances well-being and access to opportunities for all our communities.

I am pleased to note the supportive comments of the Members who spoke, and I look forward to support from across the House as I make the case for greater investment in our entire transport infrastructure. Members mentioned the opportunities presented by Europe. My

Department has a strong track record in that area, securing almost £18 million towards transport projects in Londonderry alone. In addition, my Department has secured the inclusion of €20 million towards a new multimodal transport hub in the north-west.

I welcome the support of the House as I look to build on this success and seek to lay the foundations for a modern, efficient transport infrastructure across all parts of Northern Ireland.

**Mr Durkan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that, welcome her here and reiterate my commitment to working with her in the Assembly and Executive.

The Minister comes fresh to the debate, but, for many of us, debating the infrastructural deficit in the north-west will seem quite like the film 'Groundhog Day'. It also gets me thinking of another film. Just a few weeks ago, we marked 'Back to the Future' day. In the film, Marty McFly travelled 30 years into the future to 21 October 2015. Before setting off on that remarkable journey, Doc — Dr Emmett Brown, to give him his full title — exclaimed the immortal line:

*"Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads."*

For some time now, I have been saying that Derry is the future, but it is clear that successive Ministers for Regional Development have thought that Derry is the future and does not "need roads".

I turn to the contributions to today's debate. John Dallat, who has long been a champion of infrastructure projects, particularly the A5, the Belfast to Derry train, the A6, and, of course, the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry, referred to recommendations a few years back by DRD officials to close the Derry to Belfast rail line. Had it not been not for the passion and vision of people like John Dallat and the lobby group Into the West, which is from our city, Mr Speaker, the service would not have been saved, there would have been no subsequent investment in it, and there would certainly not have been the benefit that we all now see as a result.

John Dallat spoke about the Dungiven bypass, which I am familiar with.

There are awful problems there with congestion and pollution. That bypass is long overdue. However, when it comes to Dungiven, it is fair

to say that it has been bypassed for 50 years. John also looked enviously at road development and infrastructure advances that have been made in the South.

Trevor Clarke, the Committee Chair, spoke of the A6. I actually met him in Derry one morning. He had travelled up the night before and seemed a wee bit bedraggled. I will put it down to the journey. He touched on the wider economic benefits of investing in infrastructure. He referred to the QPA and the fact that so many jobs can be created in the construction industry through ambitious road building programmes. He referred to welfare reform and the £214 million that has not been handed back. I do not know. Would all of that have been given to Danny Kennedy to build new roads and improve rail infrastructure? I find it difficult to believe that it would, given that, when there was a proposal to ring-fence the underspend or the money that could not be spent on the A5 and retain it within DRD for spend on this type of project, the Member's party and Sinn Féin voted it down.

We then had a contribution from Cathal Ó hOisín and an intervention from Mr McCartney looking at alternative sources of funding. It is vital that we are open to doing that. However, it is also unacceptable that a key pillar of the north-west's economic regeneration — indeed, economic survival — should or could be caught up in wider policy debates. Mr Ó hOisín said that the north-west must be prioritised in the Programme for Government. I can assure the House that my party will be seeking to prioritise it there as well.

Mr Cochrane-Watson welcomed the work that has been done on the railway. He said that, around 50 years ago, the Government here announced their intention to build a motorway between Belfast and Derry. The fact that that has not been done to date is shameful. I am not going to try to apportion blame anywhere — we all get a fair share of the blame from our constituents — but it really is shameful. I certainly welcome his reiteration that the UUP will support the vital A5 project, which will benefit not just the west of the North but also our friends in the north-west of the South. Donegal has suffered equally due to its peripherality.

Trevor Lunn spoke about the daily bottleneck at Moneynick. He referred to particular stretches of the A5. That got me thinking about road safety, more with my departmental hat on. The A5 has a particularly horrendous record of collisions, casualties and fatalities. Improving



infrastructure does not just save journey time; it saves lives.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank the Minister for giving way. Will the Minister accept that saving lives is equally, and maybe even more, important than the environmental issues that pertained to the proposals for the A5?

**Mr Durkan:** Saving lives should be paramount in everything that we do, so, still with my Environment hat on, I agree with the Member on that.

I thank George Robinson for his support for the motion and the virtual tour of his constituency. Declan McAleer urged the Minister to speed up progress on the A5. He spoke of Derry port and the success that the team at the port have had in comparatively unfavourable conditions. I pay tribute to the team there. We can all work to expand on their success. He pointed out, quite rightly, the links between underdevelopment and unemployment and economic inactivity. Gary Middleton cited the recent Manufacturing NI report, which is an extremely interesting document that I recommend to Members. We are glad of his support, as well, for proposals around the Waterside train station.

I have to move to dispel the theory promulgated by all the unionist Members who spoke that if we, on this side of the House, had rolled over to Tory welfare reform, all these roads would not only have been built but probably paved with gold. The SDLP tabled workable, realistic, affordable amendments to the Welfare Reform Bill, and parties here voted them down. We have no problem with welfare reform, but we will not accept unfair reform.

Claire Hanna referred to the, by now, infamous great bike and train race that demonstrated clearly that, despite the expenditure, the undeniable improvements in infrastructure, and the increase in passenger numbers on the Derry/Belfast train line, there is still much to do. Danny Kennedy, though, was probably secretly happy that the cyclist won.

In her own contribution, I am glad to say that the Minister clearly recognised that investment in transport infrastructure lays the foundation for our future economic development. She spoke of her priorities and the need to plan for the needs of our economy and, most important, the needs of our people. I am certainly happy to take the Minister's word that she will work hard to progress those issues, and I assure her of my support in the Executive, and that of my party in the Assembly, as she does so.

In conclusion, I hark back to the debate this afternoon on regional economic imbalance. Transport infrastructure has a clear role to play in addressing that undeniable imbalance. During that debate, I raised again the prospect and potential of a city deal to regenerate the north-west's economy. That mechanism can, could, and, I believe, would enable projects such as those discussed today to progress. It is my understanding that the Chancellor's door is open to a bid from the Executive for such a deal. After all, the door of Number 10 was open to OFMDFM last week. All the Executive need do is ask for it, and I am hopeful of the Minister's support for that as a means of helping her to deliver these long, long overdue improvements.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly, mindful of the transport infrastructure in the north-west and conscious of the influence good transport infrastructure has in attracting new inward investment, asks that a special case be made to source the capital investment needed to complete the A5 cross-border project, the A6 dual carriageway, including the bypass for Dungiven, the final upgrade of the Belfast to Derry rail line that will ensure an hourly service, and the reopening of the Antrim to Portadown line to allow a direct service to Dublin.*

## Question for Urgent Oral Answer

### Health, Social Services and Public Safety

#### Donaldson Report

**Mr Speaker:** Mr Jim Allister has given notice of an urgent oral question to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question they should rise continually in their places. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

**Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why he chose to outline his policies on an issue as important as the outcome of the Donaldson report at a conference in Ballymena rather than making an oral statement in the House.

**Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety):** Let me begin by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for accommodating the question at this time. My speech to an audience of front-line health and care leaders on Wednesday 4 November was a follow-up to the speech that I made at the cancer centre in May, where I addressed a group of care professionals in order to set out my vision for health and social care.

Wednesday's speech provided some detail on how I expect to deliver that vision. I wrote to the Chair of the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee last Wednesday to set out the content of my speech, and I will appear before the Committee this Wednesday to answer questions about the announcement. Oral Answers to Questions next week will provide a further opportunity for Members to quiz me on what I have said, as do written Assembly questions and correspondence.

**Mr Allister:** I acknowledge that the Minister is finally, though grudgingly, here tonight. Surely it is central to the credibility and authority of the House that Ministers make key policy announcements, when they can, to the House. By choosing deliberately not to do that, can I ask the Minister why he showed such contempt for the House and its processes, and how he thinks the general public can be expected to show respect if he demonstrates such obvious contempt? And, if I am permitted, can I ask him why, since he is sweeping away the Health and Social Care Board, he is not also dealing with the Public Health Agency? Why can its functions not be dealt with by the trusts and his Department?

**Mr Hamilton:** Mr Speaker, the Member is some fellow to be talking about treating the House with contempt. He has fallen foul of the Speaker's Chair, whether it was with you or previous Speakers, on more than one occasion.

I welcome the fact that, latterly, he asked a question about the substance of the speech instead of concentrating on a peripheral point about process. I am not surprised that Mr Allister would want to do that; that is his style.

## 7.00 pm

I also wonder why the Member seeks to pick out a particular Minister for criticism for not making an announcement in the House. You could draw up a long list of Ministers from probably every party who have made statements outside the House by way of press statements, radio or newspaper interviews or

speeches at events — by whatever means. In fact, only today, the Agriculture Minister made a major announcement after a big consultation on the value of basic payment scheme entitlements and young farmers' top-up rates, something that I understand the industry has been waiting for an announcement on for the best part of a year. It is of considerable significance to that sector, as, I am sure, Mr Allister will appreciate, and I wonder whether a question for urgent oral answer has been tabled by him about why that was announced by press statement and not in an oral statement in the House.

**Mr Allister:** *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Hamilton:** I suspect that it was not.

Typically, Mr Allister, the big macho man who wants to be seen as the one who takes on Sinn Féin, is not taking on Sinn Féin on this issue but is instead singling out the DUP. That, of course, is Mr Allister's style. That is what he always wants to do. He does not really want to take on Sinn Féin; in fact, he wants to embrace them in government, in line with the latest policy position that he has adopted.

On the issue of the Public Health Agency, I think that public health is incredibly important —

**Mr Speaker:** I remind the Minister that the two-minute rule applies.

**Mr Hamilton:** OK. I am sorry that I cannot answer the Member on that.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** If this is the right thing to do, I want to offer our support to the Minister. He has long heard from me and my colleagues that we have an overly bureaucratic and complex system, with ineffective and confusing decision-making. Therefore, if it is the right thing to do, whether the statement was made in the House or outside it, you will find an ally in us.

Having said that, I ask the Minister, because much has been said about the lack of political consensus, whether this is a genuine break with previous DUP Ministers of Health. Can he accept or will he agree with me, that there was political consensus on the delivery of health three-plus years ago, when we collectively signed up to Transforming Your Care? Where it failed was the Department and previous Ministers not putting the meat on the bones. Go raibh maith agat.

**Mr Hamilton:** I look forward to attending the Committee tomorrow. I was pleased to accept the invitation of the Chair to attend. I am happy to go into much more detail on the announcement that I made last week in questions from her and fellow Committee members tomorrow. I welcomed her comments last week, which were supportive of the announcement, and I welcome her comments here today. I accept that there has been on different occasions a consensus of sorts. I think that I said to the Chair when I appeared before the Committee in early July that there has been in the past a degree of consensus on some health reforms, and I am sure that she appreciates that the reforms that I was outlining went significantly further than what has been said in the past, particularly on Transforming Your Care. *[Interruption.]* Sorry for that interruption.

**Ms Maeve McLaughlin:** I hope that that was not Jim Wells.

**Mr Hamilton:** It was Peter Robinson, actually. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McCartney:** That's the last two Ministers phoning you.

**Mr Hamilton:** It was the First Minister.

The reforms that I announced yesterday were additional to Transforming Your Care. I am prepared to accept that some mistakes may have been made in implementation in the past, and we need to learn from those mistakes. It would be churlish to attack each other on the basis of those mistakes. We need to learn from them, because the challenge that is before us to get health and social care right now and to get it right for future generations is too big a prize for us to get petty about. We need to build the political consensus that I have spoken about; if we do not, we will have a health service and a social care system in Northern Ireland that will fail. That is the evidence that is coming forward, whether it is from the Donaldson report or from clinicians on the front line. That is why we need to do our level best to set aside the political differences that we have from time to time on some health issues and try to build a shared vision of a world-class health and social care system for Northern Ireland.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I call the next Member to speak, I will say that this is obviously a hugely significant and strategic discussion. I have half an hour, and I have an extensive list of people who wish to ask a question, so I have no

flexibility to allow any further mini speeches. Members will get straight to the question; the Minister will answer it; and we will endeavour to give everyone on the list the opportunity to ask a question.

**Mr Easton:** What type of feedback has the Minister had on his announcement from the people who really matter?

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for his question. The feedback so far has been positive, and significant political communications have been made that have been quite supportive of it. I acknowledge the comments made by the Chair of the Committee today and last week, which I think are helpful and bode well for trying to build the political consensus that I spoke about last week and have spoken about in the past.

I might agree with the Chair, and we might be able to agree with others on the way forward, and that is important. I think that it is a critical factor in trying to reform our health and social care system. But we need to listen to what people on the front line are saying, and the feedback that has come from clinicians, many of whom have written to me or emailed me about the decisions or announcements that were made, has been exceptionally positive. They see the opportunities in de-layering the system and in getting rid of bureaucracy. They see the attempt to remove barriers to innovation as a vote of confidence in them, and that was what it is intended to be.

We have a fantastic health and social care system in Northern Ireland. Yes, there are challenges, and we know that there needs to be change, but we have some incredibly talented and gifted people. When you go out on to the front line and speak to them, and they tell you to your face that they believe that the system of bureaucracy that we have, currently, is getting in the way of them doing things that they know that they can do and that will achieve better outcomes for people in Northern Ireland, you have to listen to them, and you have to take action, and that is what I am proposing to do. I am encouraged by the feedback coming from the front line; from clinicians, doctors, nurses and others. I think that we would all do well to listen to their response, to be encouraged and emboldened by that, and to try to move forward and make the reforms to our health and social care system that we all know that we need to make.

**Mr McKinney:** The Minister was clearly stung by criticism of his in-out approach. I think that

he made that point at the outset of his speech, but he did not bring this to the House so soon after coming back. Given the importance of gaining consensus around changes in health, has he not done his project a great disservice and risked criticism that he is more interested in deflecting further criticism from his in-out approach and long-term DUP failures over health than in gaining important consensus if change is to be achieved?

**Mr Hamilton:** I made it clear that I wanted to be in office but, equally, I did not want to see people murdered on the streets of Northern Ireland. The Member and his party were offered the opportunity to do things in a much cleaner and clearer way through having an adjournment or supporting a suspension, but they did not take that. Action was required in those circumstances, and we took that action.

No one was as frustrated as I was, because I know the extent of the decisions that needed to be taken to reform our health and social care system. I wanted to take those decisions, and I am glad that I was able to outline my vision and announce those decisions around reforming our health and social care system, getting rid of a layer of bureaucracy, appointing a panel, and talking about how we can finance transformation moving forward. I am glad that I was able to make those decisions. I think that it ill behoves the Member to do what he is unfortunately prone to do and try to criticise. I think that he would do well to take a lead from the Chair of the Health Committee and the stance that she is taking.

The Member also seeks to criticise the state of the health service at this time. I appreciate, and no one knows better than me, the difficulties that the health service currently faces in Northern Ireland. However, given the fact that his party's stance in blocking progress on welfare reform is costing the whole Executive £9.5 million each and every month, which will mean £200 million to be lost by the end of this year — countless thousands of operations, assessments and treatments could have been carried out using that money — if there is anywhere that the finger of blame should be pointed for the difficulties that our health service is facing, it is at those who seek to squander that money at a time when it is needed at the front line in Health, in DRD and right across the board.

**Mrs Dobson:** Does the Minister agree that the figures clearly show that the board lost the run of itself in terms of administrative staffing, with a 40% increase in three years? Why was it allowed to become a bloated board? Will the

Minister accept that he and his predecessors have responsibility for pumping it up to 600 staff?

**Mr Hamilton:** I do not accept the criticism. What we need to be careful about — I sought to be careful about it last week, and I hope that the Member does not take the argument down that line, now or in the future — is that we focus on the staff within the system. In fact, as I said in response to Mr Easton, I think we are blessed and very fortunate to have some fantastic staff in our health and social care system.

**Mrs Dobson:** In administration.

**Mr Hamilton:** Even in administration, I am sure she will accept that there are some incredibly gifted and talented people who are working in the board and on other parts of administration within our health and social care system. It is not about them or their number; it is about developing as efficient a system as we can possibly have.

When I go out and speak to people on the front line, as I mentioned, they tell me that the layer of bureaucracy that was created in the last Assembly term got in the way of them being innovative and caused confusion. When you have senior consultants saying to you that they do not understand the system, how it works and how it benefits the people they are serving and the patients they are working to make better, you have to listen to that feedback and appreciate that there is a problem with bureaucracy. That is not about the numbers of people; it is about the system.

My objective is to dismantle and de-layer that system so that we can get the best out of the people in our health and social care system. There are some incredibly talented and gifted people. I want them to serve in a system that makes the most of their talents, not a system — which, unfortunately, is the one we have at the moment — that has got in the way of their talents and has not unlocked them in the way that we should all be seeking to achieve.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas agus cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas. I thank the Minister for the statement, and I welcome it. The statement refers to the principles that the health service should be free at the point of delivery and that there should be equal access for all, but, given the huge inequalities that exist within the system, how

does he intend to address those inequalities with what he proposed in the statement?

**Mr Hamilton:** I thank the Member for welcoming the statement. I accept the point that she is making. One of the principal objectives of the reforms that I have outlined — which I hope the House will, in time, support the implementation of — is to get the most efficient use of the £4.7 billion that is currently spent on health and social care in Northern Ireland. One of the ways in which we can better tackle the health inequalities that she referred to is by the more efficient spend of that money that is going into the system.

Getting rid of a layer of bureaucracy will help, certainly, but that is not what will automatically come from that. I appreciate that, but it is about creating a system where that money — which is close to half of the complete Budget — comes out at the other end as better outcomes for people. That obviously includes tackling many of those health inequalities.

One of the other things that I announced last week — it did not get a terrible lot of attention — was my support for the creation of a transformation fund so that we can develop and fund some of the innovation that is out there, which sometimes gets funded through the system and sometimes does not. Much of that will tackle issues around health inequalities, as well as trying to get new, innovative, very creative ways of tackling many of the problems and challenges that we face, not just in our society but right across the world. Many aspects of it will have an impact on tackling the sort of issues that she mentioned, if not directly, at least by making a more efficient system, which will be better for everybody in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McGimpsey:** How many staff are currently employed within the board? Since it performs a vital function of commissioning services from the trust, how many staff will be required for the new structure, which, I understand, he calls a directorate within the Department, and how many staff, if any, will therefore become surplus?

**Mr Hamilton:** The current figures as of March this year show that the net average persons employed by the board were 584, of which 544 were permanently employed.

**7.15 pm**

We are undertaking a scoping exercise to look particularly at what the announced reforms that

will close down the board will mean in actual actions that need to take place. As I said in my speech last week, there are clearly implications for the board and its staff. As the Member highlighted, some staff will move to the Department, some will move to the trusts, particularly those who are involved in planning for care, and some may move to the Public Health Agency, which I intend to align much more closely with the Department and focus more on early intervention and prevention and the good work that it can do on the public health agenda.

We are not definite on the numbers yet, and work will be undertaken to do that. Those people are doing useful tasks and jobs, particularly on planning for care and need. That will continue to be undertaken, but it will just be undertaken in a different place. We can sometimes get a little obsessed about where people work and the name of the entity they work for. I want to create a system-wide approach and get the best out of the system we have. Unfortunately, the reforms that were implemented in 2009, which the Member will be all too familiar with, have been tried and tested and have not worked. They have not made the best of the talent within the system. That is why I made the suggestions and proposals last week to take away that layer of bureaucracy that has blurred the lines of accountability and has got in the way of getting real innovation across our system. I hope that the Member recognises that and will support the reforms that I have proposed.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the announcement by the Minister. He is absolutely right: it has to benefit those on the front line. Indeed, I have received a number of complaints from nurses in Antrim Area Hospital about a situation in the emergency department there. I will discuss it with the Minister tomorrow at the Committee.

What contact has the Minister had with trade unions about his announcement and the implications for staff?

**Mr Hamilton:** I did not address that point in response to Mr McGimpsey's question. The announcement has been made and there will be discussions with the unions as we roll it out. They will be very much involved in the process. There will be a consultation on the proposals for the board and removing that layer of bureaucracy, and I expect them to participate fully in that.

As I said before — I tried to say it last week — this is not an exercise in trying to make savings

by getting rid of the board. There may be some monetary savings, and what monetary savings there are will be redeployed back to the front line. That is a very important point; we are trying to get the most efficient system that we can possibly get.

I do not envisage the need for compulsory redundancies; that is not something that I think we will be looking at. Whilst some posts will be no longer required, as I tried to outline to Mr McGimpsey, a substantial number will be required because of the important work they do. At the minute, they are doing it in the board. They may be doing it in the Department, in the trusts or elsewhere in the future, but there will still be important work for those people to do. In some cases, they are doing a good job already, so that will need to be tapped into to ensure that it continues to be the case. They may be in a different place, but that is less important than removing the bureaucracy that I think the Member and I share concerns about, making sure that we get that efficient system, and getting the best from the talents of those who are operating within our health and social care system.

**Mr Swann:** The Health and Social Care Board was one of the key players and often one of the main stumbling blocks in the reformation of children's cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland. Where do the parents and users of that service look to when the Health and Social Care Board is no longer in place after the current review? What moneys will be available from the Minister's transformation fund for children's cardiac services in Northern Ireland? I declare an interest as my son had an operation three weeks ago.

**Mr Hamilton:** I appreciate the Member's particular interest in the issue. He has raised it with me in the past in the Chamber.

I welcome the fact that he recognises and characterises the board as a "stumbling block" — I think that he used that phrase. I do not want a system in which there are stumbling blocks. All too often, I have heard such a characterisation of our health and social care system: stumbling blocks, barriers, hurdles and entities get in the way and allow the buck to be passed while, ultimately, very little is done.

I think that the Member is jumping ahead a couple of stages on the transformation fund and the board itself. Obviously, this is my view and is what I want to do. I am glad to have received broad support about the board, but it is not a matter of my standing up in Ballymena, in the Chamber or wherever to announce this and its

happening overnight. A process must be gone through. A legislative process will have to be undertaken before my proposed changes are fully implemented. We are talking about some time off in the near future for implementation. In the short term, the current arrangements remain in place.

I cannot say how much any project will get out of a transformation fund that has not yet been created. In my speech, I said that I want to create a transformation fund to encourage and to finance those innovations that we all know that we need and that sometimes, within current budgets, trusts or others find difficult to fund because they are spending so much on keeping front-line services going. However, they know that these will be beneficial for cost savings and better outcomes for patients and people. That is what the funding is about. I cannot commit to any amount of funding because I do not know what any increase might be or whether I will get an increase at all in the health budget for the next Budget period. I am determined to parcel off a significant portion of that for a transformation fund so that the changes that we know we need can be made.

I remain committed to the all-Ireland congenital heart paediatric care network, and I want it to be developed as quickly as possible.

**Mr Speaker:** That concludes this item of business. Thank you, Minister and Members.

As I announced earlier, Mrs Overend is not in a position to move the Adjournment debate.

*Adjourned at 7.22 pm.*

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