



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 October 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I refer you to the debate last week on openness and transparency. You will recall an exchange on the Floor in respect of the rights of smaller parties and their participation in debates. Will you review the Hansard report of that debate in relation to three matters? First, given that exchange, will you, as Chair of the Business Committee, consider circulating the minutes of a Business Committee meeting in late May of this year, when the rights of smaller parties with regard to their speaking in the Chamber were decided? Secondly, subject to the content of that minute being circulated, should Mr McCartney be invited to correct the Hansard report? Thirdly, will you review Mr McCartney's comment during that debate, when he referred to a Member being economical with the truth? That could be unparliamentary, depending on context and circumstances. I ask you to consider those three matters and make a ruling on whether Mr McCartney's comment was unparliamentary.

Mr Speaker: I will review the Hansard report.

Private Members' Business

Racial Equality Strategy

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

Mr Lynch: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the positive contribution that ethnic minorities make to our

society; notes with concern an increase of 87% in hate-related crime in the last four years; and calls on all Ministers to continue to give priority to implementing the racial equality strategy and the Together: Building a United Community strategy, and to providing the financial support to ensure that both of these strategies are supported and implemented.

I do not support the amendment. Sinn Féin is fully committed to implementing the two strategies referred to in the motion, the racial equality strategy and T:BUC.

First, it is important to outline the positive contribution that ethnic minorities make to our society. They provide substantial economic and social benefits to the North of Ireland. A recent report written by two academics from Queen's University said that about 4% of the workforce is made up of migrant workers. It is reported that they contribute more in tax than they use in services. The report highlights contributions in taxes, labour and cultural diversity and how they are enriching our society rather than threatening it. We frequently hear claims that migrants take our jobs and use up our limited services. The truth is that they are vital to this economy. We, as political leaders and elected representatives, need to stand up for a vision of an open, tolerant and outward-looking society. Mind you, the tone of the rhetoric and comments on immigration and foreign workers emerging from last week's Conservative conference could be described as toxic, sending out the wrong message and making people feel fearful and vulnerable. As a society, we need to challenge prejudice and prejudicial attitudes at every level.

Figures quoted in the recent Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) report state that 14% of nine- to 10-year-olds and 8% of 12- to 13-year-olds were bullied because of their colour. Those are the ones who came forward. Those are the ones who we know about. There are silent voices out there of those who keep quiet until it is too late. Minority ethnic students experience lower levels of belonging and higher levels of exclusion.

Schools tend to lack the knowledge and awareness needed to deal with issues of ethnic minorities and how they find themselves in certain situations. We had the incident of a woman who was at the airport to pick up her mother and, while waiting in the cafe, was asked to produce her identity. When she showed her passport, her son asked, "Mummy, do we have to carry our passports at all times?". It is wrong that, simply because of her colour, this woman had to show her passport to prove that she belonged here.

In recent weeks, we have had a number of calls about more needing to be done to tackle racial discrimination. A recent report from the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance:

"calls upon all political parties to take a firm stand against intolerant discourse and instruct their representatives to refrain from making derogatory comments targeting a group of persons on grounds of their 'race', religion, citizenship, language, ethnic origin, sexual orientation or gender identity."

The report makes a total of 23 different recommendations to the UK Government. One of those recommendations includes the implementation of an equality strategy. In the UN report, concluding observations on the elimination of discrimination set out a plan to achieve a vision of where we live in a society free from fear and intimidation. While the report welcomes the positive action taken by the Assembly in the publication of the racial equality strategy 2015-2025, it expresses concerns that the North of Ireland does not have an equality Act. The UN Committee calls for the adoption of a bill of rights for the North of Ireland. The UN Committee report also notes with concern the reduction in resources for the Human Rights Commission and that measures that are adopted must be meaningful and relevant and aid an increase in the reporting of racist hate crime.

The Human Rights Commission, in its submission to the UN Committee, raised concerns about the fact that there is no single equality Act here in the North. It is also important to note that the Equality Commission has called for an equality Act and that the commission has a paper on its website listing the disparities.

The Equality Commission has also highlighted the point that black and minority ethnic individuals in the North of Ireland have less protection against racial discrimination, harassment and victimisation than people in

other parts of the UK. It has produced a paper called 'Race Equality Law Reform: Strengthening legal protection'.

The rise in hate crime here is disturbing, and I appeal for political leaders to highlight the positive impact of inward migration. It is sad that people living in the North of Ireland today, particularly the foreign national population, have never felt more insecure about their vulnerability to crime. Sinn Féin believes that everyone has the right to freedom from fear, and that is a challenge for the policing and judicial system to meet. It is a challenge that must be met without prejudice and with respect for human rights. Racism is prevalent, and we need political leadership.

Sinn Féin welcomes the announcement by the Human Rights Commission that it is investigating the issue of Travellers' accommodation. The chief commissioner commented that the commission completed a scoping exercise in June 2016 that identified significant human rights concerns on a potentially systemic level. Its findings concluded that a human rights examination of the issue is necessary. The commission will publish its findings in autumn 2017. One has to ask this: in the 21st century, where is the equality of justice, opportunity and dignity without discrimination for every man, woman and child from the Travelling community?

Eleanor Roosevelt said:

"Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home — so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he"

— or she —

"lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works."

Everyone living in the North of Ireland has the right to equality before the law and the right to the equal protection and benefit of the law without discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, ethnic origin, nationality, gender or gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, age, social or economic status, marital or family status, residence, language, religion or belief, or politics or other opinions. That is the goal that we should all work towards.

Mr Beattie: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "four years;" and insert

"further notes the concerns of bodies representing ethnic minorities that gaps exist in our racial discrimination laws; and calls on the Executive to fulfil their responsibility to implement the racial equality strategy effectively by putting in place an action plan, timetable and key priorities, and to ensure that the Programme for Government reflects this obligation."

We all look to our experiences while dealing with black and ethnic minority communities, be that when they come to a constituency office and you talk about issues that they have, when we see it on the streets or on the news or when you notice on holiday how things are slightly different in a cultural sense. I spent seven months living with Hazara people in a village, and, as the guy who was the ethnic minority living there, I saw what it must be like for them living here. I spoke to the wakils, the imams and the village elder and tried to understand the culture. I went out of my way to try to eat their food continuously, to wake when they woke, to go to bed when they went to bed and to understand them culturally. I tried to learn about their religion and tried to offer them my religion and my culture, but I found it extremely difficult. I felt like an outsider. I felt alienated. I felt isolated. That must be what it is like for those from minority communities who come here to live and who try to integrate but find it incredibly difficult, no matter what they do. That difference is the real problem.

I welcome the motion from Mr Lynch and welcome the fact that he brings it to the House for debate, but his words do not match the motion. The motion is weak. It is a soft ball being bounced around the Executive. It is not pushing the issue forward. It is the same argument that we had two and a half years ago.

The Ulster Unionist Party amendment —

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that our BME communities could be forgiven for thinking that they are not a priority? They had to wait for five years in the absence of a strategy; every year, groups do not get a decision on their funding in time; and there has been no review of the Race Relations Order, despite that being agreed by the Assembly close to 10 years ago.

10.45 am

Mr Beattie: I absolutely agree; we need to drive this issue forward. We had the debate two and

half years ago, so we need to take it and move things forward. That is what our amendment is all about: setting an action plan; setting a timetable, which is important; and setting key priorities. It is absolutely no good sitting in the corner doe-eyed like a puppy, looking up and saying that we have an issue without driving that issue forward.

Our amendment gives BME communities strength, and it gives an intent to the motion. I ask people to think before they decide to vote against it.

Of course, we have laws here that deal with our two-tier equality strategy: the Race Relations Order 1997 and the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998. The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance believes that Northern Ireland should consolidate its equality legislation:

"taking inspiration from the Equality Act 2010".

We do not have that, and we all know why. That is an argument for a different day, but it is something that we really need to drive towards.

When we think about the BME community, I guess that we all think about the Romanian migrant workers who come here, set up home, put down roots and live amongst us. I guess that we think about the Portuguese, Polish and Lithuanian communities who now live among us. I think that that is what we all think about. If you go out into the community, you will have people complaining that these communities are filling our NHS and our A&Es. Yes, they are filling our NHS and our A&Es. They are filling them with doctors, nurses, skilled labour and non-skilled labour. They are absolutely a part of the community — a valued part of the community. On that, I absolutely agree with Mr Lynch.

There are other groups that we have to look at as well, such as the Roma gypsies or the Irish Travellers. They are no different and are all in need of help as well. With all those groups, we really have to look at how we can address measures to support them, including education, employment, healthcare and accommodation. In the case of Irish Travellers, we have to make sure that we have caravan sites for them.

Yesterday, we had a very heartfelt debate on Syria. We know that refugees are coming out of Syria, but we need an integration programme for those who come to live here. We cannot have the same debate in two and half years' time and say that we will have such a

programme. We need to do it now, and that is what is what our amendment is all about.

The European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance calls on:

"all political parties to take a firm stand against intolerant discourse and instruct their representatives to refrain from making derogatory comments targeting a group of persons on grounds of their 'race' [or ethnic origins]"

It goes on to talk about sexuality, but I will not get into that.

We have something that we really need to do as political representatives. We need to watch our words and give a firm commitment to people in the BME community that we will support them. If you remember, a while back, Peter Robinson said that he would be happy to send members of the Muslim community to the shop. Fair enough, he apologised, and I absolutely believe that it was a slip of the tongue —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Yes; absolutely.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member accept that using language that at least implies that refugees are similar to dogs is perhaps not appropriate either?

Mr Beattie: I stand and I answer. You have asked me something that is absolutely obvious. Of course, I accept that. If you had allowed me, I would have gone on to say that Peter Robinson apologised for what he said — absolutely. I was going to say that there was no inference that he meant what he said. It was a slip of the tongue, but we all need to be concerned by that slip.

Look at the Sinn Féin motion in Derry City and Strabane District Council calling for a ban on Israeli goods. I understand what Sinn Féin is trying to do, although I do not agree; but that raises the stakes for the Jewish community here. We have to be careful of our words. There is no point in saying, "We need to support our BME communities", when you allow your councillors to table a motion that alienates some of the very people we are here to protect.

I thank Mr Lynch again for tabling the motion. I am glad that we have the opportunity to debate it on the Floor. I hope that people listen to the debate and then make up their minds, rather

than walk through a Lobby because it is the easy thing to do. I hope that they think about it. What we are proposing, as well as an action plan, timetable, and key priorities, is that all our Departments and Ministers be held to account. This does not sit just with the First and deputy First Ministers: it sits with the Ministers of Finance, of Education and of Health. They need to come together to come up with a strategy and set the targets.

I acknowledge the motion, but I move the Ulster Unionist Party amendment.

Mr Irwin: I believe that in Northern Ireland we pride ourselves on being friendly and welcoming; indeed, that has been acknowledged in survey after survey and review after review by those in the travel industry and many media outlets across the world. However, we are also well aware that, on occasion, unsavoury elements in society raise their head. That can be in the most sickening of ways. Attacks on any individual or, indeed, race are absolutely wrong and can never be reasoned away as anything other than a criminal act deserving of the most stringent punishment.

In Tandragee, in my constituency, only a few days ago, a young eastern European family was targeted in an attack that left them terrified and feeling that they could no longer stay in the area. Indeed, they have since moved away. The gang targeted the house, breaking the glass in the rear door of the property. That is a concerning incident, but, thankfully, the family, including their baby, were unharmed in the attack. However, such attacks leave a very real feeling of vulnerability amongst the victims, and that is the unseen impact of many of these attacks.

Sinister footage also surfaced last week of schoolboys abusing a Romanian woman in a shocking incident. Indeed, it was all the more worrying given that young schoolchildren were the ones hurling the abuse and using very distasteful terminology. It is clear from the type of hurtful and racist comments used that there is work to be done to change attitudes and perceptions across all age groups, including amongst schoolchildren.

The view of the majority in Northern Ireland is, of course, one of tolerance and respect. In my constituency, a number of large businesses heavily rely on staff from ethnic minority backgrounds. In many cases, workers from ethnic minority backgrounds make up the bulk of the workforce and make a very valuable and vital contribution to those companies. Indeed,

that is repeated in companies and organisations across Northern Ireland. However, there are, of course, very worrying incidents of people being trafficked to Northern Ireland by criminal elements and made to work in unacceptable conditions. This again came to light in recent days, when a Romanian gangmaster appeared in court for keeping 15 people in a three-bedroom house against their will, taking their wages and telling them, when they rightly complained about the conditions and of hunger, that they could eat stones. That was a shocking state of affairs, and it is all the more shocking given that the gangmaster had a string of convictions in other countries.

In my constituency, operating a full-time constituency —

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member's giving way. At the end of the last mandate, this House, I think by 90 votes to 9, passed the human trafficking legislation.

The instruments now exist in statute for judges to issue severe penalties to those who traffic and exploit people in the way that the Member describes in his constituency. Does he agree with me that that is what needs to happen in cases like that?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Member for his intervention. I believe that the full rigours of the law should be brought to bear on those responsible.

In my constituency, operating a full-time constituency advice service, I assist many people, including those from ethnic-minority backgrounds. Many within that category who contact me are in full-time work, with very good employment conditions, and are keen to remain in employment in Northern Ireland. I know that the Executive have a responsibility with regard to the matters that are outlined in the motion. They are matters that Ministers in my party take very seriously and will continue to tackle head-on to help to change attitudes and confront racism in any form.

Mr McPhillips: As the SDLP spokesperson on the Executive Office, I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on an issue that, considering the increase in race-related crimes, has, at least prima facie, got much worse in recent years. Issues of race and immigration have raised their ugly head across the UK and Northern Ireland in recent months, and it is concerning that the North of Ireland is often

labelled as a racist state. It must be said that, especially in Great Britain, racist attacks have been exacerbated by the decision of England and Wales to leave the European Union, which has brought with it a sad state of affairs.

(Madam Principal Deputy Speaker [Ms Ruane] in the Chair)

Racism and xenophobia take many forms in society and actively disadvantage people based on their race, ethnic background or religion. The debate is timely, as there is a lack of clarity on future British Government policy regarding immigration and there is yet to be a very clear reassurance to the immigrants and migrants who have chosen to make their home here in the North.

As we discuss the motion, it is of utmost importance that the Assembly acknowledges that migrants make a huge contribution to society, from local economies to providing key roles in the health service and tourism sector. Without this contribution and the cultural variation that exists, the North would be a much more depressing place to live, and our public services would most likely collapse. Despite this, and perhaps most worryingly, the most recent PSNI figures from June 2016 show that racist attacks continue to be a scourge on society. In the 12 months to June, 1,113 incidents were recorded where there was racist motivation, of which 700 contained one or more crimes. This means that, each day in Northern Ireland, there are a worrying three hate crimes reported to the PSNI. Only yesterday, the 'Irish News' reported that, during the period from 1 April to 1 October 2016, there were 600 hate crimes. That underscores the big issue that it is across the North, and immediate action must be taken.

Such crimes are intolerable. It is my opinion that the vast majority of people in the North of this island are repulsed and disgusted by racist attacks, but we must acknowledge that certain sections of society have certain prejudices, and the Executive have failed to address them due to inaction. They have failed to permeate the deeply held views in some of the most deprived communities. Tackling this must be a main priority during this mandate as we move closer to a Programme for Government.

Since the last racial equality strategy expired, it has taken almost 10 years to produce another. This is mostly due to mounting pressures from the Equality Commission and other organisations, which have clearly identified gaps in provision here and have called on the Executive to drive forward and implement a

racial equality strategy. Despite the publication of the new strategy and all its commitments — for example, in attempting to tackle bullying in schools, calling for a review of fair employment legislation and a promise to tackle racial crime — the only progress that has been made to date has been the appointment of a subgroup and racial equality champions.

11.00 am

These are welcome developments and have an important role, but there has been a fundamental failure to include an action plan, there are no specific time frames, nor has there been the correct level of resources for implementation. We have no responsibility or accountability.

If this Chamber and the Executive want to take racism seriously, they must properly develop and invest in a coherent action plan. Otherwise, any advancements will be only tokenistic and will not end the plight of racism that many suffer on a daily basis. It is for this reason that I, and my party, will support the Ulster Unionist amendment. We need to get serious on racism, and we hope that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister fully acknowledge the concerns raised today and take meaningful action to rectify them.

We need the strategy to do what it says on the tin: provide ultimate protection for ethnic minorities —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McPhillips: — and educate and raise awareness to tackle racial inequalities and hate crimes in the North of Ireland once and for all.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. As others Members have already noted and highlighted, racism is a profound problem in this community and society. Indeed, we are often dubbed in the regional and national media as a race hate capital in Europe.

There have recently been some decreases in reported racism, and that is to be welcomed. However, emphasis has to be placed on the word "reported"; sadly, and all too often, it is the unreported crimes that should give us the greatest concern.

I will begin by thanking our colleague Mr Lynch for bringing a motion on such an important issue, and we will support it. However, the

Government are not really doing their job. Racism in Northern Ireland has, perhaps, become more disturbing over the last number of years, and we have already heard of the types of incidents and issues that arise in our constituencies when it comes to race hate and crimes. I had expected to spend most of my time discussing the complexities of dealing with racism in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, the racial equality strategy. Unfortunately, and rather ridiculously, my argument will have to focus on another issue: the failure of the Executive and Executive delay.

I am standing with my party and Opposition colleagues somewhat bemused as Sinn Féin brings forward a motion calling on their own deputy First Minister and his Executive colleague Arlene Foster to implement the strategy. One wonders why Sinn Féin and the DUP criticise opposition when they seem themselves, as the Opposition, to criticise their own Ministers. It is not even the first time this week that the inability of the Executive to function has resulted in their own parties having to come to the Chamber with motions to try to motivate them to do their jobs.

And here we see the consequences of the lack of action — a barely implemented strategy for dealing with a problem that, if not dealt with, will have a continuing and ongoing damaging impact on the whole of Northern Ireland and our communities for decades to come. Racism in Northern Ireland — the strategy addresses this — impacts housing, schools, jobs and healthcare, yet somehow there has been failure to implement the strategy. My colleague Chris Lyttle recently received a response to a question on the racial equality strategy, with an update on how it was progressing. The answer outlined three points proposed in the strategy that had been acted upon. That is three out of 11. I do not think in anybody's book that can be seen as a success.

Where is the Minister of Education today to update us on how he has identified ways to tackle racist bullying in schools? Where is the Minister of Justice to tell us about her plans to develop an approach to tackling race hate crime — indeed, if any of that is happening at all?

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr Carroll: Does the Member agree that one of the deficiencies in the racial equality strategy was the absence of any indicators or ways of

assessing how Ministers were increasing or decreasing racism through their actions and words?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Madam Principal Deputy Speaker. I totally agree with the Member. Has the fair employment legislation been reviewed? Has the delivery model for the minority ethnic development fund been reviewed? On paper, dealing with racism is considered an important issue by the Executive.

It is intrinsically linked to dealing with sectarianism. Yet, in practice, public policy is shaped more in dealing with the things that divide unionists and nationalists, nationalists and unionists. The isolation that the ethnic minority groups feel in Northern Ireland is a result of being considered last. Is it that we are working so hard to heal our sectarian divisions that we ignore the divisions and problems of minority and ethnic communities in Northern Ireland?

We need to embrace the proposals of the strategy, and we need to implement it in full — not small steps. We need to develop it in full. We need to introduce a single equality Bill, harmonise and update existing equality and anti-discrimination measures and strengthen equality provisions. We need a Bill that revises fair employment monitoring to ensure that monitoring better reflects the diversity of mixed and multiple identities in Northern Ireland.

I extend my support to the amendment because the issue of racism in Northern Ireland needs to be dealt with at every level of government. As Mr Carroll said, without an action plan, a timetable and key priorities, the task is just the greater. A Programme for Government reflecting this obligation is required. Today, my plea on behalf of the Alliance Party is to implore the First Minister and deputy First Minister to prioritise the strategy. We, in the Chamber, know what happens when irrational prejudices are allowed to fester in this society and community. It is important that we strive to overcome those prejudices and redirect our resources towards the most vulnerable and isolated groups in Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party will support the motion and the amendment.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion today. From the 1600s, Northern Ireland has had a long history of immigration. From the influx of Scots during the

plantation of Ulster to the 19th-century arrival of a large number of Italians. The past influences of immigrants can be seen everywhere in Northern Ireland from the growth of the linen industry, which led to vast prosperity across the Province, to the beautiful marble and terrazzo in the Great Hall of this Building, and who has not been to the north coast for an ice cream?

Between 2000 and 2014, we in Northern Ireland moved from a position of net migration loss to one of an annual population gain. During that period, it is estimated, around 175,000 people settled here, which is a completely unprecedented position for us to be in. Immigrants are an intrinsic part of our culture, probably on a greater level than we even appreciate daily. Yet, it seems that, in recent times, we have developed an attitude that immigration is something to be feared rather than celebrated. Whilst racially driven hate crimes have decreased in the last year, they are still at an unacceptable level. There are incidents such as the recent attack on Jewish graves in the Belfast City Cemetery, and, only last week in my constituency, three young men filmed and posted to social media footage of themselves racially abusing and throwing stones at a Romanian woman. That highlights that there is still a massive amount of work to be done on how we view people of differing races and ethnic origins. It is, however, comforting for me to see the outrage that was demonstrated on social media by the people of my home town, Antrim, to that revolting incident.

I realise that much of the anxiety around immigration is caused by the misconception that people coming to live here are a drain on our public services. Of course, the increase in our population means that we must look at the number of available school places, the way in which we manage our healthcare system and accessibility to social housing, all in the context of financial constraints. The economic and social contribution that immigration provides cannot be ignored. For example, due to nursing shortages, our Department of Health has recently undertaken a programme of recruitment for nurses from the Philippines, Italy and Romania. Those nurses will deliver much-needed assistance in our health trusts. Frankly, we would be at an absolute loss without the care that they provide in our hospitals. It is estimated that around 30% of doctors and 40% of nurses working in the NHS in the UK were born abroad. I cannot stress enough how much that assistance is to be applauded and welcomed. We are all aware of the pressures on our health service, and I, for one, am grateful that we have such skilled individuals

willing to take up the mantle, come to our country and work in our hospitals, surgeries and clinics, and look after us all as patients.

The racial equality strategy seeks to tackle racial disparities and eliminate racism and aims to encourage good race relations. It is only the start, but I hope that it is given the recognition that it requires across all Departments. It is vital that we recognise the contribution that immigration can bring to our society culturally, socially and economically. I am pleased that each Department has appointed a racial equality champion and hope that they will work proactively to implement, monitor and review how the strategy works in practice. The workings of the subgroup, alongside the Executive Office and other Departments, will give a clear picture of areas that could be improved and of areas that are working well, and that will consequently bring a positive change in the delivery of the strategy.

While we currently have the lowest rate of immigration in the UK, I hope that, in moving forward, we continue to educate and inform people that immigration is not something to be afraid of and we should embrace the cultural diversity that it affords. Attacking people simply because they are of a different skin colour or speak another native language cannot be tolerated in our society, and I trust that all Departments will bring forward the racial equality strategy, bringing about the societal change that will inevitably follow. I support the motion.

Mr McGuigan: Like everybody else, I welcome the opportunity to speak to today's motion. Muhammad Ali once said,

"Hating people because of their color is wrong. And it doesn't matter which color does the hating. It's just plain wrong."

Muhammad Ali was correct, of course, but it is an unfortunate reality that racism exists in our society today. Whether it takes the form of physical attack, attacks on property, graffiti, verbal abuse, bullying on social media or the not-so-visible unequal access to jobs and services that others take for granted, racism is destructive to individuals and communities and needs to be tackled. Just yesterday, as Mr McPhillips said, it was reported that, in the past six months, over 500 race hate incidents took place in the North. That is between two and three race hate incidents a day. One race hate attack in any time period is one too many.

When I think of the millions of Irish citizens who left this island out of necessity at the time of the

famine or in the early and late 20th century and the various forms of treatment that they received, both good and bad, when landing in America, Australia, England or elsewhere around the world, I believe that we have an extra special duty to welcome, embrace and support all those who come to these shores. Whilst the "No blacks. No dogs. No Irish" signs may be an iconic snapshot of a previous time, let us just hope that those sentiments remain where they belong: in history. They should, however, serve as a reminder for us to remain vigilant to hatred.

The 2011 census figures demonstrate the diverse nature of the minority ethnic community here. Over 32,000 people gave their ethnicity as something other than white. That figure will continue to grow, and I welcome that. It has already been said by my colleagues Seán Lynch and Doug Beattie that people who come to Ireland add to our society. They add to it economically through their work and spend, but they also add to it culturally. The world is now a smaller place. It is a much smaller place than it used to be, and our neighbours may not have an "O" or a "Mc" in their surname any longer. While society is changing, it is important that our policies and practices change and adapt to the new situation.

We must ensure that equality means equality for all. The racial equality strategy is a vital cog in that wheel, and the motion calls for the strategy to be given the priority and financial support to see that it is implemented. The strategy demonstrates a commitment to eliminate discrimination, promote equal opportunities and develop good relations. It is key to identifying the real and varied needs of our ethnic minority population. It identifies barriers and how to overcome them, and it raises awareness and helps focus responsibilities.

I welcome the words of Martin McGuinness on the publication of the strategy:

"We must not just aspire to create a place where people can live, learn, socialise and work together regardless of race or ethnicity, we must all step forward and make it happen. Government alone cannot and will not eradicate racism and racial inequalities. There are already many people and organisations who are doing powerful work in their neighbourhoods, places of worship and workplaces to tackle racism. The Strategy provides a platform for action to build on these efforts and generate further momentum."

As well as welcoming those sentiments, I praise the people in our community who do great work to make the lives of those who come to our shores easier and to tackle racism. In particular, I thank the Ballymena Ethnic Minority Forum for the work that it does in my constituency. While I agree with Martin that government cannot do this alone, politicians, as others have said, have an important role to play in trying to eliminate racism. Whether it be discussing this subject, migration, refugees, conflicts across the world or even Brexit, we need to be careful with our language.

Sometimes what we say and how we say it produces consequences. I take exception to Doug trying to compare imposing economic sanctions, as used against apartheid South Africa, with derogatory comments denigrating people because of their ethnicity.

11.15 am

I am glad that the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination report welcomed the racial equality strategy as a positive step and a road map to tackle racial discrimination. I am less happy that the UN report had to point out that, in the absence of an equality Act here in the North, we still face challenges to combat racism.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to close?

Mr McGuigan: I support the motion, and I call for it to be implemented, along with, in the future, an equality Act in the North.

Mr Humphrey: I speak not as a member of the Executive Committee but as a Member for North Belfast.

The Belfast Jewish community continues to make an important and valued contribution to the life blood of Belfast. At sunset tonight, Jews across the globe will celebrate Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Across Europe, synagogues will have armed guards because of the risk of attack on those places of worship. In the past few years, deadly attacks on kosher shops in Paris, a synagogue in Copenhagen and a Jewish museum in Brussels have occurred. In the United Kingdom, Jewish schools have guards and bombproof windows.

The Community Safety Trust, members of which I met some months ago, has produced the following statistics: in 2014, there were 1,179 anti-Semitic attacks in the United Kingdom; last year, there were 924 similar

attacks. There have been anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish Members of Parliament Ruth Smeeth and Luciana Berger. Anti-Semitic racism is the oldest type of racism that exists. Sadly, it is not just on the European continent, and is not just on the mainland of our United Kingdom. The synagogue is in my constituency, and Members will be aware of Rabbi David Singer speaking very recently of the evil anti-Semitic phone calls and emails that he, as the pastoral leader of the old and established Belfast Jewish community, has been receiving.

The graffiti recently daubed on the synagogue and in Belfast city centre was absolutely sickening and harked back to the 1930s and Nazi Germany. Sadly, these attacks followed the removal of the Chaim Herzog plaque from a building on Cliftonpark Avenue. The plaque was removed for its protection. There was an attack on a mural in Northumberland Street that praised an Ulsterman who worked with the Israeli defence forces. Also, in August of this year, in an awful and evil attack on the Jewish sector of Belfast City Cemetery, 13 headstones were damaged by a mob carrying bricks, rocks and hammers. Having spoken to the rabbi on two occasions, having met, along with the Belfast Lord Mayor, the Belfast Jewish Council in the City Hall, and visited the synagogue recently, I have to say that the Jewish community in this city is very fearful of attack.

The debate that took place in the Guildhall, Londonderry last week was mentioned. Without question, parties who voted for that motion have to take responsibility for raising anti-Jewish tensions in Northern Ireland. I have spoken to members of the Jewish community who have told me that that is exactly the case. They are friends of mine, and I know it to be true.

In making good the damage at Belfast City Cemetery, I have met the director of parks for Belfast City Council and the local police in north Belfast. I have invited the Chief Constable to visit the synagogue. I have invited the First Minister of Northern Ireland to join me —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I will surely.

Mr Stalford: Does the Member agree that the disgusting attack in the City Cemetery was merely the culmination of a campaign directed against the Jewish community in Belfast that goes back a long way? We have not only kids from Israel working on the Dead Sea products stall in Castle Court being attacked but products

being torn off supermarket shelves because they come from Israel.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Humphrey: The Member is quite right: people take part in so-called pro-Palestinian rallies, but they turn out to be anti-Israel rallies. I am not here to speak about the whats, wherefores and "whataboutery" of Israel; I am talking about the indigenous Jewish community in this city.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I do not have time. Sorry.

As I mentioned, tonight is Yom Kippur: the Day of Atonement. The evil people who took part in the attack in the City Cemetery, daubed graffiti on the synagogue and sent threatening emails to members of the Jewish community, including the rabbi, need to atone for their evil actions across not just Europe but this United Kingdom. We must stamp out anti-Semitism. I and my party will continue to stand firm in support of Belfast's small but growing Jewish community. They have provided so much to this city's cultural, political and, most importantly, commercial life, and they continue to do so. The Jewish community is valued in this city. I am greatly privileged to represent the Jewish community in North Belfast, where the synagogue is placed, and I regularly visit there. The attack is a sad reflection on the city. This city, nationally and internationally, was damaged reputationally by that vile and evil attack in the City Cemetery.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Humphrey: Such actions have to be condemned across the House. I am glad that they were.

Mr Smith: I support the amendment. The First Ministers made a short statement on 27 June, after the EU referendum result, in the context of increased attacks on migrants in Great Britain. They reassured local migrant communities that they were welcome and valued in Northern Ireland. That statement needs to be echoed and amplified once again. I call on the Executive Office to reiterate that statement today with greater volume and more repetition.

A few days after the referendum, I was invited to one of the larger and more successful agri-food businesses in my constituency to speak

with the company's management team. From memory, about 18 people were part of the management team, the vast majority of whom were from other countries; they were not originally from the UK or Ireland. They came from a wide variety of EU states, such as Slovakia, Poland, the Baltic states and Portugal, to name but a few. All those people had long service with the company; I think that, on average, it was nine years. Most had been promoted during their service in tribute to their skills, motivation and contribution. Many had married while living in Northern Ireland, some to locals and some to other migrants not necessarily from their own country. They are all bringing up their children in Northern Ireland, putting down roots and making a valuable contribution to our economy and society. During the next hour or so of the meeting, the managers detailed to me their fears and concerns, which were amplified by the Brexit decision. Some asked about what would happen to their children, as their children had UK passports and they did not. Some asked whether they should proceed with their house purchase. Some asked whether they should start to look for work outside Northern Ireland. They were all very concerned for their future, and they were not alone. The business owners were equally concerned for the future of their company and about access to labour, skills and markets.

Our migrant labour community needs to hear from the House. A loud, unified voice needs to come from here to say that that community is welcome and valued and will continue to be so, no matter the outworkings of Brexit. I understand that some people are concerned by migration. Indeed, it was said to be one of the main drivers for the Brexit vote. I say to the people who are genuinely concerned that Northern Ireland is the UK region least affected by migration. The latest figures show that Northern Ireland has a net 1.2 migrants per 1,000 population, compared with 4.5 in England, 1.9 in Wales and 1.5 in Scotland.

Yet all studies show that our migrant worker community makes a significant positive contribution to our economy and society.

The cause of racial equality and the development of a diverse and vibrant society has taken a knock post-referendum. I call on the Executive Office to include in an action plan tasks that will help instil confidence in the migrant worker community. A good start would be to send out a clear message today to migrant workers, their families, their employers and the wider Northern Ireland community.

Mr Stalford: I am glad to speak in this debate. You will know that I am very proud to be from Belfast, as are other people in this room. I am very proud that Belfast enjoys a well-deserved reputation of being in the forefront of being a welcoming and kind city with welcoming and kind people. We can take pride in the fact that the people of Belfast elected a Jew from Hamburg to be the Lord Mayor of their city at a time when Jews across Europe and, indeed, on this island were being subjected to pogroms and persecution.

We can be proud of the fact that civil and religious liberty is afforded to all our citizens, whether they be Jew, Muslim or Christian. I believe very much in the words of Shimon Peres, who said that we are all Abraham's children, and those rights that I ask of others, I would give to them.

I do not believe that any child is born hating people. Attitudinally, children see no difference between each other. I have seen this in the case of my own children. My daughter is in P2 and my son is in P1, and they both have classmates whose parents came from beyond our shores, and they see no difference between the children in their class who are Polish or Lithuanian and themselves.

All around Belfast, we see the positive contribution that has been made by people born beyond our shores. In south Belfast, the most well-established ethnic minority community is, of course, the Chinese. The Chinese people came to Belfast and invested in our city at a time when nobody wanted to and when the heart was literally being ripped out of the city. So we recognise in government the valuable and positive contribution that people make. It is important that it is put on record that that is the case. Through the racial equality strategy, the minority ethnic development fund, the crisis fund, the racial equality subgroup and all the other programmes that the Government are responsible for, we give a lead on tackling racism and working to create a place in which every person feels safe and secure.

Northern Ireland is a compassionate place and a compassionate society. Over 200 people have been settled here under the vulnerable persons relocation scheme. These people are here because they are fleeing a hellish war zone. We talked yesterday in the House about the circumstances that have forced people to flee Syria, and I would like to believe that, were I ever confronted with circumstances similar to those that those people are facing, friendly neighbours would let me in.

Coordinated action across government is evidenced even this week. Hate Crime Awareness Week, involving the Executive Office, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, Victim Support, the Probation Board, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department of Justice, shows that the Government take our responsibility seriously in these areas, and we are determined to act to protect all our communities from fear or persecution.

Once again, I thank Members for the contributions that they have made. I think that there is broad agreement in this debate about the direction in which we want to travel, and that there is a recognition of the need to travel it.

11.30 am

We must all recognise that those of us in positions of responsibility have a role to play, and I believe that that is the case for every Member of this House: that we are committed to delivering a society in which everyone feels safe, secure, valued —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes, I will.

Mr F McCann: This is with respect to your intervention when the last Member from your party was up. He rightfully mentioned the disgusting attacks on the Jewish plot in the city cemetery. However, he did not go on to mention that the local community rallied behind the Jewish community to show their abhorrence at those attacks. When we mention those attacks, we should also mention the actions taken by the local community.

Secondly, when people come out onto the streets in support of Palestinians, it is not anti-Jewish sentiment; it is against Israeli attacks on Gaza and the West Bank. That is what they are doing.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute. When an intervention is made, it should be short.

Mr Stalford: Thank you. I am absolutely happy to acknowledge that that is the case with the local community. In the communities that I represent, I have seen occasions when a dreadful attack takes place, and an entire community can be branded like that as a racist ghetto, usually on the front page of certain newspapers, an allegation that is completely

removed from the reality of the situation on the ground.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Stalford: I say to the Member, very briefly, that the ease with which people interchange the word "Zionist" for the word "Jew" is deeply disturbing.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Claire Hanna. You will have five minutes, but if you choose to take an intervention, on this occasion, I will not be able to give you an extra minute.

Ms Hanna: That is a good reason not to take interventions.

I welcome the debate on the motion. It is right and timely for the Assembly to send out a clear and unambiguous message to people of ethnic minorities and those who have come here to live and work that their contribution is valued and needed and that denigration of them will not be tolerated any more.

I hope that the Executive deliver on this, and, as such, we support the constructive Ulster Unionist Party amendment. The racial equality strategy has taken too long; it cannot just be about photo opportunities or a talking shop. It has to have meaningful actions, targets and accountability.

We welcome the publication, a number of months ago now, of the racial equality strategy, but we share the deep frustration at the years that it took to bring it forward and the lack of demonstrable progress on it. We regret the failure to address a number of gaps and imbalances that have led to this region trailing behind in legal protection for black and minority ethnic people. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has, for almost a decade, repeatedly highlighted the faults in the race relations orders and amendments to that legislation. I want to ask the Government when they will make those legislative fixes. If ever anything deserved a quick royal prerogative change, it is that.

As Mr Dickson said, we need to differentiate between sectarianism and racism. Certainly, they are related cancers for this society, but there is a danger that sectarianism, which I accept is our biggest challenge, will crowd out the growing issue of racism, in terms of resources, funding and police time. The same black and minority ethnic funding has to be

shared out from projects as diverse as great projects like the Mela festival in Belfast and those tackling the destitution of refugees and asylum seekers. In no other funding stream would those two needs sit side by side, but we justify it because both address the needs of minority ethnic communities.

We also need to be very aware of the language of politicians. A casual "N" word in a tweet or a "not trusting people to go down to the shop" remark sends the message that such language is acceptable and legitimises the demonising of new arrivals and people who are different.

Failure to tackle myths was a feature of the Brexit debate. It laid the blame for many societal problems at the feet of new arrivals, and that was very stark. I took part in a debate recently in which a senior politician was asked about net migration figures and did not know the statistics. When he was advised of the very small figure — we are almost a net exporter of people — he said that the quantum did not matter and that it was the perception that there were too many migrants. When did it stop being the responsibility of politicians to base our policy on fact and to challenge myths?

It is all too easy to pin racism on specific communities. I think that that is an issue; we are labelling communities where race hate attacks take place as "racist communities".

I will be very clear: anybody who attacks, does graffiti or intimidates on the basis of racial difference needs to be very forcefully targeted by the police, but we cannot let off the hook higher-level and institutional xenophobia that feeds exactly that information.

A Business in the Community report published yesterday collected the experience of 25,000 workers around the UK from ethnic minority backgrounds, including those in Northern Ireland, and showed that black and minority ethnic backgrounds are under-represented at every management level. One in eight workers is from an ethnic minority background, but only one in 16 occupies a management position. Thirty per cent of those surveyed had experienced racial harassment or bullying in the workplace. There are a number of recommendations that I will not have time to go into on using public procurement to incentivise racial diversity and for businesses to demonstrate real leadership.

Related to that is the need for better regulation of precarious and low-paid work. That is obviously not just a minority ethnic issue, but the horrific stories in the media last week of a

gangmaster keeping workers almost as slaves highlight the need for increased protections and vigilance across society.

The context of the debate is, of course, Brexit and the fact that tens of thousands of people, who are contributing here, are propping up our public services and are making a net benefit, have a cloud hanging over their head and have had all year. They do not know whether they can sign that lease or whether, if their kids started school, they will be here in a couple of years. To say that those people are "bargaining chips" —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring her remarks to a close?

Ms Hanna: — for the UK is appalling language, and the Executive should have been first out the door to condemn that language. We support the motion.

Mr Ross (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I want, first of all, to thank everyone who participated in this morning's debate. I think that the tone highlighted the fact that, as Mr Stalford said, everyone in the Chamber is committed to welcoming minority ethnic communities and those working in our society here in Northern Ireland. I mentioned last week during Question Time how we need to have a greater aspiration than simply building a tolerant society. We need to have one that recognises and celebrates the diversity and cultural richness that modern Northern Ireland is all about. As Members said during this debate, we must recognise that migrant workers and ethnic minorities contribute not only to the economic life here but to our social, political and cultural life, and that contribution is incalculable.

The skills, talents, fresh perspective and energy that migrants and minority ethnic people bring benefit all of us. Since being appointed as junior Minister, I have had the privilege of attending many events with our ethnic communities and seeing first-hand the important role they play in making Northern Ireland a better place for all of us. Of course, I have long recognised the important role that migration plays in many important sectors here in Northern Ireland, not least the agri-food sector, as some Members referred to.

I want to emphasise that, whilst we often use terms like "minority ethnic communities" or "migrants", we are, of course, talking about families, individuals and colleagues, and I think

that it is important to put that on the record as well.

Mrs Cameron, in her contribution, spoke about migration to Northern Ireland over a long time. Over the last decade, of course, we have had people from a diverse number of nationalities, cultures and ethnic backgrounds come to Northern Ireland to make a new life, joining existing community and minority ethnic families, including the Chinese community, the Indian community and the Jewish community, who have lived here for many generations, and, of course, Irish Travellers, who have been here for many centuries.

Mr McGuigan, in his contribution, talked about that diversity being reflected in the 2011 census, which reported that there are now over 90 languages spoken in Northern Ireland. So, our society is changing. The old ways of seeing things and the old prejudices are falling slowly away, and, hopefully, they are being replaced by a much more cosmopolitan and complex take on life and society.

Mr Lynch, in opening the debate and proposing the motion, talked about the importance of the racial equality strategy, and many Members touched on that as well. That strategy was, of course, launched last December, and it is full of ambition and high expectation. It establishes a framework for Departments and others to tackle racial inequalities, to eradicate racism and hate crime and, along with the Together: Building a United Community strategy, to promote good relations and social cohesion. We must be clear that it will take the work of society as a whole to achieve racial equality, and to ensure that we work towards that common goal, it is important that the opinions of everyone are taken on board. By sharing experience and knowledge, we can collectively address the issues of racial inequality and work towards a fully inclusive society, and that is exactly how it should be.

Mention was also made of the subgroup. I was pleased to join my junior Minister colleague and the First Minister and deputy First Minister recently at the inaugural meeting of the equality subgroup.

It is important that the subgroup has a voice that will be heard at the very highest level of government. I am pleased with the feedback that we have already had from participants, and I know that it is meeting again next month.

A number of Members talked about hate crime. Of course, the motion is explicit on reports of an 87% increase in hate-related crimes over the

past four years. Mr Lynch also talked about "silent voices", and that is something that we should recognise. Historically, racism and racist incidents have been under-reported. We can look at statistics in different ways, but, in one sense, an increased number of reported incidents shows that people from ethnic backgrounds are now more confident in coming forward when they have been the victim of such racist attacks or abuse. It also shows that there is more confidence in the police. However, irrespective of what is behind the statistics, it remains a source of shame and causes damage to our society's reputation and to our economy, and it must be challenged.

Although hate crime is, first and foremost, a matter for the criminal justice system, the Police Service, the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and the courts, we must all play our role in challenging it at every turn. I am aware that, behind statistics, there are real individuals who have been abused and insulted, who are frightened and intimidated and who increasingly can be isolated in society. A number of Members raised specific issues in their constituency, and it is important that they did that.

Mr McPhillips mentioned the European referendum. Again, it is important to put on record that the post-Brexit spike in race hate crime in England and Wales is not reflected in Northern Ireland. That received considerable media coverage, but the evidence that we have has suggested that racist attacks in Northern Ireland are falling, and that should be welcomed. It is also important to say that the referendum did not create racism. The calling of the referendum did not cause it, and the result is not going to bring about more racism or get rid of racism. I caution against drawing that link, because in all societies there are always those who resent, fear and hate those who are different from them based on race, gender or religion. Those people are wrong, and they are misguided and misinformed, and, as I said, we have to challenge that.

It is encouraging that the 2015 life and times survey, which was mentioned earlier, showed that 61% of people living in Northern Ireland think that the culture and traditions of minority ethnic people add to the richness and diversity of Northern Ireland society. It also found that 68% of people here said that it is important to them that public bodies such as local councils, hospital trusts and Departments take into account the needs of ethnic minorities. That has also been my experience from attending some of the events that took place around Community Relations and Cultural Awareness

Week, where many people participated to learn more about what is going on there.

Mr Beattie proposed the amendment. Of course, he was critical of the Executive, which has been a running theme since we returned following the Assembly election. He talked about his experience of living abroad and the challenges that there are for ethnic minorities or newcomers to Northern Ireland in living here. That is absolutely right, for it is quite a courageous thing to move to a new country and a new culture. However, I am continually encouraged by talking to people who have started a new life in Northern Ireland, particularly those who have been part of the refugee resettlement programme, and by how welcoming they have found people in Northern Ireland. Undoubtedly it is challenging for them, but they have emphasised how welcome they have been made to feel.

He mentioned the review of legislation. I know that there have been media reports about that in the past few weeks, and a number of other Members mentioned that as well. The Executive are aware of the suggestion of gaps in the legislation. The racial equality strategy commits to a review of the current legislation, including a review of the current Race Relations Order and fair employment legislation, and Mr Agnew, Ms Hanna and others commented on that.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ross: Yes.

Mr Agnew: Does he agree that, rather than taking a piecemeal approach to the review of various pieces of legislation, we should be looking at having a single equality Act?

Mr Ross: That is an important point to make. The statute book is an incredibly messy thing. There could be piecemeal approaches taken to different pieces of legislation that could be encompassed in a consolidation Bill of some sort. That is something that the Executive Office will look at. We are going to examine the statute book to see what legislation is there. If a consolidation Bill is required, that can be something that we will give consideration to.

Talking specifically about refugees, I mentioned the courage that it takes to come here. The Department has assisted the humanitarian crisis through the vulnerable persons relocation scheme (VPRS), which is currently the only formal scheme through which we receive refugees.

It has been successful: over 200 people from Syria have resettled here under the scheme and, as I said, been made to feel welcome. The feedback has been very encouraging, and we expect to consult on the refugee integration strategy later this year.

11.45 am

The draft Programme for Government (PFG) sets out, in outcome terms, the improvements in well-being to which the Executive aspire for everyone living in Northern Ireland, and we remain committed to the implementation of the racial equality strategy. Over the coming weeks, we will work to explore how the strategy's implementation can support the achievement of the PFG outcomes, with particular reference to addressing the issues raised by minority ethnic communities.

Mr Dickson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ross: I will not give way, because I have only five minutes left, and there are a lot of contributions I want to get through. I hope that the Member forgives me for that, because I generally do give way.

The racial equality strategy subgroup has a significant role to play in making sure that action plans, timetables and priorities are moved forward at a quick pace. The subgroup will advise the Executive Office and other Departments on the implementation of the strategy, and it will be tasked with working with Departments, and vice versa, to develop an implementation plan, and with monitoring and reviewing progress on implementation. That is an important role.

I will touch on some of the other comments made by Members. Mr Irwin mentioned that Northern Ireland is a welcoming place, and that is borne out by conversations that I have had with people who have resettled here. He talked about a particular incident in his constituency — an incident that, of course, should be condemned — and the importance of working with the police to ensure that those responsible are held accountable for their actions and dealt with appropriately when brought in front of the courts. This is Hate Crime Awareness Week, and junior Minister Fearon and I will join the Justice Minister later this week to highlight some of the issues around race crime and look at how we can tackle those attitudes in society.

Mr McPhillips talked about the failure to tackle the issue. We all have a responsibility for this. Members have said before that political parties

have a responsibility for what their members put on social media, and councillors have a responsibility for the motions that they support and the impression that that gives society. He talked about investment, and there is £60 million going to the T:BUC strategy over the next five years, which is hugely important. He and Mrs Hanna talked about financial support for minority ethnic groups.

The minority ethnic development fund is as successful as it has always been; in fact, it is more successful than it has ever been. Since the fund was established in 2001, it has supported hundreds of different projects and helped thousands of people. Over £1 million is being distributed through the minority ethnic development fund to assist minority ethnic and community organisations to promote good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds.

Over 30 projects are being supported in this financial year. It is important to highlight that the number of applications is increasing year-on-year. For 2013-15, 85 applications were received. That increased to 92 applications for the 2015-16 fund and to 99 for the 2016-17 fund. That is indicative of the growing confidence among minority ethnic groups, which means that they are coming forward and not only highlighting issues of concern to them but promoting and celebrating the role that they play in Northern Ireland. There is also the crisis fund, which has a £100,000 budget and was established to assist vulnerable migrants, destitute refugees and asylum seekers, those who have been subjected to trafficking — my colleague mentioned the Bill that was passed here and the additional powers that that has created — and other identifiable vulnerable groups, including the Roma. That issue has been raised.

Mr Dickson talked about the need to tackle racism, and he was exactly right. That is why we have the strategy and the subgroup up and running. I am encouraged by the feedback, as I have said many times before. He talked about the isolation felt by many ethnic groups. That is not what we are hearing from the subgroup, which feels that they are being listened to at the highest level of government, which is very encouraging.

Mrs Cameron talked about the incident in Antrim. I think that all of us were horrified when we viewed the video footage, and people across the country were rightly disgusted. She also talked about the importance of migrant community workers in our health service, which, again, everybody would agree with.

Mr Humphrey talked about the impact on the Jewish community in Northern Ireland. It is worrying that, particularly in Great Britain, there seems to be a rise in anti-Semitism in one of the main parties. He talked specifically about the harassment of the Jewish community in Northern Ireland. It is important that the House condemns all types of racism and intolerance, whether it is based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation or anything else. We should not tolerate it.

Mr Smith talked about the referendum, and I have cautioned Members about linking the referendum to the scourge of racism in our society. He said that we need to echo the statement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister about the importance and value of migrant workers in Northern Ireland.

It is not just the words but the actions. I know that Executive Office officials have been in contact with minority communities and migrant workers in Northern Ireland to reassure them that they are very much part of Northern Ireland's fabric of society, advise them on their rights and continue the long-standing relationship that we have with them. He said that it is important that we state how valuable they are. I have not heard a single person say that we do not support the migrant community in Northern Ireland, nor have I heard a single person say that they should not remain here post Brexit. Mr Stalford talked about their positive contribution and the fact that many children are in much more diverse schools than would have been the case before.

Today's contributions have clearly demonstrated the breadth and depth of the support here for the Executive's work towards achieving racial equality and good race relations. We recognise that racial equality and good race relations are essential if we are to flourish, but I would counsel that there is no quick fix to this. There will be a sustained effort on the part of Departments, public and private sector organisations and businesses and individuals. I am proud of the work that this Department and the Executive have done to try to achieve those goals. I do not think that anybody underestimates the challenge, but —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Minister bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Ross: — through the racial equality strategy, the minority ethnic development fund, the crisis fund, the racial equality subgroup and other programmes, we will continue to make sure that we make progress on the issue.

Mr Nesbitt: We have a motion, and we have an amendment. It is a motion that is not much more than warm words, if it is more than that. They are woolly words and confused words about budgets and how they relate to strategies. However, in the amendment from my colleague Mr Beattie, there is something concrete, something that says, "Let's have action plans, timetables and priorities, so that we know where we are going". Is that not consistent with the new Executive commitment to outcome-based accountability in government, the very thing being talked about in this city in a two-day conference that will come to Parliament Buildings later in the day?

If we are looking for a real clue about the Executive's commitment in this area, where better could we look than the important letter penned by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom on 10 August, which highlighted five concerns about the implications for Northern Ireland when we leave the European Union? It was a letter stating the blindingly obvious. One of the concerns was about migrant workers, and there was a plea to the Prime Minister to recognise that we need to be allowed access to unskilled as well as highly skilled labour in the public and private sectors. However, there was no recognition that we value those people as more than the mere commodity that they were defined as in that letter. Do we really value them? Do the Executive really value them? We saw today the fault line, with one half quite rightly talking about the valuable contribution made by the Jewish community in Belfast over the years and the other half supporting attacks on the state of Israel. I know that we can conflate ethnicity with nationality, but there is the fault line.

The Member for South Belfast brought in the contribution of the Chinese community down the years and during some very difficult years. I notice that he failed to mention the Indian community and Diljit Rana, for example, who came here in difficult times and decided to build a business empire. He found it rather difficult, because, every time he opened a business, republicans blew it up. I may exaggerate by saying "every time" because he obviously got there eventually.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker, do I have five or 10 minutes?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Five.

Mr Nesbitt: Five minutes.

Mr Lynch says that ethnics have never felt more insecure as if his party has not been in government and in charge for the last nine and a half years, as if there has not been a long hiatus between the racial equality strategies, and as if stakeholders like the Council for Ethnic Minorities do not think that the new strategy is a retrograde step. The minority ethnic development fund saw another hiatus. Why did we tell groups that we would fund the gap last year and then change our mind? We are sitting on this estate dealing in billions of pounds and saying to those small groups, "You will have to go to the bank or wherever you go to and find some sort of bridging loan to see yourselves through". I do not think that it is fair, and I do not think it reflects a proper commitment to our ethnic minorities.

I am a little disappointed with the quality of some of the debate. Mr Irwin seems to think that we are a welcoming country because travel journalists think we are a welcoming country. I do not know what that has to do with this. Mrs Cameron said that, since the 1600s, Northern Ireland has had a long tradition. She is as confused as the First Minister. Northern Ireland is not even 100 years old. There is a big tradition in the north-east of this island but not in Northern Ireland. Mrs Hanna talks about the failure to tackle myths. We are in danger of moving into a post-factual society, and the new realities and the new normals —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his comments to a close?

Mr Nesbitt: — are that Northern Ireland is no longer a binary state of orange and green or unionist and nationalist. That is why we should support the amendment.

Mr Boylan: I want to read a few words into the record and then pick up on some of the contributions. I have to commend the Minister. He must have been reading my notes.

I want to take the opportunity to commend the Executive on their vision for the T:BUC strategy, which outlines a vision of a united community based on equality of opportunity and the desirability of good relations and reconciliation and strengthened by its diversity where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together free from prejudice, hate and intolerance. The strategy seeks to address the deep-rooted issues that have perpetuated segregation and resulted in some people living separate lives. It is important to note that the T:BUC strategy is a journey

towards a more united and shared society. There is clearly a long and difficult process of change and development for our society in the North of Ireland. Strategies such as T:BUC and the racial equality strategy demonstrate that the Assembly is trying to challenge sectarianism, racism and prejudice. It is important that we have a joined-up approach in government to tackle all those problems. Notwithstanding the comments made in the EU and UN reports that my party colleagues mentioned, the T:BUC strategy recognises the serious problems that we face in the North in tackling sectarianism, prejudice and hate.

One of the shared aims of the strategy is to continue to improve attitudes amongst our young people and to build a community where they can play a full and active role in building good relations. I want to highlight one example: the shared education campus of St John's Primary School and Moy Regional Primary School, which has been selected by the Department of Education as one of our new shared campuses that will be created over the next number of years. As well as three shared education campuses, other initiatives include getting 10,000 young people who are not in education, employment or training a place on a new United Youth volunteering programme; establishing 10 new shared housing schemes; developing four urban village schemes; developing a significant programme of cross-community sporting events; removing interface barriers by 2023; and piloting 100 shared summer schools. If we are to measure the success of T:BUC, look at what outcomes have been achieved.

In addressing all the issues that we face in the North, we must not forget the Good Friday Agreement, where the declaration of support commits —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes; OK.

Mr Lyttle: I mean this with the greatest respect to the Member, but he spent minutes talking about targets that were set about three years ago and washed over the outcomes that have been achieved without referencing any.

12.00 noon

Mr Boylan: It is a work in progress — *[Interruption.]* It is a wee bit rich of the Member: he has come into the Chamber at the end of the debate and has not really been listening in. I was good enough to give him the intervention. I

know that it is a work in progress and that junior Minister Fearon, like junior Minister Ross, has been doing a lot of work on it. If the Member does not mind, I will continue with my speech.

The declaration of support commits all participants to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all in sections on rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity. The signatories affirmed their commitment to the mutual respect, civil rights and the religious liberties of everyone in the community, and we need to continue to see that implemented. That is according to the Good Friday Agreement. That is why it is important that the departmental equality schemes are robustly implemented.

I want to go back to where I started off. I have written down exactly what the junior Minister wrote down about the debate — they are the same notes — but I will not go through all of what was said. I will say this: my colleague said it at the very start. People should read the motion. I have heard words like "woolly" and Doug Beattie talked about it being "weak", but Mr Lynch said that the Executive are committed to those two strategies. The main point that he highlighted — I think that we would have agreed on it in the Chamber — is the need for a single equality Act. A number of Members, including Steven Agnew and others, mentioned that on the Floor of the House. That is what we are talking about. We all know what the Equality Commission and the UN reports have stated. As I said, I have recorded everything that Members said and will pick out a few brief points.

Let us start with Mr Beattie, because I have touched on him. The only other point that I want to make about my colleague Mr Lynch — he mentioned it and the junior Minister picked up on it — is the issue of silent voices. That is a concern for us and something that we certainly need to look at. I want to talk about Mr Beattie's contribution; he certainly shared some of his experiences. He is right: he finished his remarks by saying that it sits with Ministers. I agree, but we all have to take collective responsibility. There is another issue. He spoke for seven and a half minutes. It is not for me to say what his contribution should be about, but I will say this: his last three lines were only about those three words. He talked about an action plan, timetable and key priorities, and I would have thought that this was the forum and an opportunity for people to bring forward suggestions for those. I would have liked to hear that in his contribution.

Mr Nesbitt made the winding-up speech on the amendment, and he also had an opportunity to

raise those points. It is OK putting the motion to the vote. At the end of the day, part of your contribution was that it sits with Ministers, but if you read the motion you will see that it refers to the Ministers and responsibility. I do not know how you can bring in those two points without making any reference to how we will achieve that or what your ideas are. I sit on the ethnic minorities group as the ethnic minorities spokesperson. We have a meeting next week, and we will go through this debate and see exactly what was said. I think that there was an opportunity for the debate to be expanded into that.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: No, I want to finish some of the other comments. To be fair to the Member, I normally do give way, but I want to pick up on some of the other points.

Richie McPhillips picked up on a good point. He is right about Brexit because there are concerns that, after Brexit and the vote on Europe, those issues have raised their heads. There is no doubt about it: the number of attacks has grown and there are concerns about that.

Mr Dickson always makes a good contribution, but I thought that it was a wee bit rich picking on the Justice Minister. His party had the Justice Ministry for five years and the Justice Minister was not here. To be fair to him, he has always supported the idea of a single equality Bill. He mentions that all the time, along with us. I just wanted to pick up on that point.

Mr McGuigan highlighted some of the issues. It is shocking to think that there have been 500 race hate incidents in the last six months. It is certainly very worrying and something that we need to look at.

I will just pick up a few other points. Claire Hanna is not here, but she said something about looking at the legal framework. The Minister, in his contribution, said that he would examine the statute book. That is a positive comment.

I will finish there. I support the motion and am against the amendment.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 30; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Ms Armstrong, Mr Attwood, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Butler, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Ms Hanna, Mr Kennedy, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Ms Mallon, Mr Mullan, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Smith, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Beattie and Mr Nesbitt

NOES

Mr Anderson, Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Ms Dillon, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Ms Fearon, Mr Frew, Ms Gildernew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Irwin, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyons, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuigan, Mr McMullan, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Sheehan, Mr Stalford, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Boylan and Mr McGuigan

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the positive contribution that ethnic minorities make to our society; notes with concern an increase of 87% in hate-related crime in the last four years; and calls on all Ministers to continue to give priority to implementing the racial equality strategy and the Together: Building a United Community strategy, and to providing the financial support to ensure that both of these strategies are supported and implemented.

Assembly Business

Mr Agnew: On a point of order, Principal Deputy Speaker. Since your appointment, you have been called many things during debates, including Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that, in each instance, the Member in question meant no disrespect.

The Principal Deputy Speaker will have her own view on the term "Madam", but I argue that it is perhaps somewhat outdated. Can we review

the titles that we give to the Speaker, the Principal Deputy Speaker and the Deputy Speakers and look at removing gender-specific titles?

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: My preferred title would be *Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle*, or Principal Deputy Speaker, but it is up to the Members to decide what way they want to address me.

Private Members' Business

Healthier Lifestyles for Children

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on Healthier Lifestyles for Children. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes.

Ms Lockhart: I beg to move

That this Assembly encourages schoolchildren to live a healthier lifestyle; acknowledges that following the introduction of a levy on drinks with a high sugar content, an estimated £18 million will be allocated from the Treasury to the Executive's Budget in 2018; and calls on the Minister of Finance to ring-fence this money to fund an educational awareness and physical education programme in schools to benefit the long-term health of our children and to ease pressure on the health service.

I bring the motion today in the hope that we leave a legacy for the children and adults of the future. I want to commend Neil Johnston of Chest, Heart and Stroke for his very proactive lobbying and hope that this will get cross-party support. We do not want to look back and see a history of wasted money or missed opportunities. We want to see, in this mandate, a focus on our children's health. This is a unique opportunity to shape and set in place a programme of healthier living. The £18 million that I refer to, very clearly comes as new money to this devolved Government. It is not costing us anything but is, in essence, a windfall from the UK Government, following the introduction of the sugar tax, or, to give it its correct title, the

soft drinks industry levy. Under the Barnett formula, we will obtain our share of the tax, which is aimed at the producers, not the consumers, of soft drinks.

It is a stark fact that in Northern Ireland 22% of children are classed as obese or overweight in primary 1. By the time they reach year 8, this has risen to 29%. All the studies show that being overweight is preventable through healthier choices of food that are accessible and affordable and regular physical activity. The reality is that obesity problems manifesting in primary 1 and upwards are being carried forward into early and later adulthood. The estimated cost of obesity to the Northern Ireland economy and the health service is around £370 million per year, through absence from work and problems with ill health. I read that the cost to the Health budget represents 3% of the Department's overall spend.

My thought on the motion is that, surely if we can invest to prevent, it should be a priority for the House. The figure of £18 million has been suggested by the Department of Health's obesity prevention steering group, and will potentially reduce year on year, which is welcome because it means that drinks will be reformulated to a healthier combination. This is about penalising the companies who produce drinks with a higher sugar content, and ensuring that we make the best use of this resource to tackle and prevent obesity.

The sole aim of this motion is to garner support and allow for early preparation in the Department of Education for a physical education programme in schools that will allow for increased physical activity at an early age. Currently, in the schools curriculum, it is suggested that there should be two hours of physical education for children aged between four and 16. Unfortunately, whilst two hours is the suggested amount, many are getting just one hour per week, on average. The reality is that 36% of children in P1 to P3 get less than one hour per week. At this early age, we all know that children are absolutely bubbling to get out of the classroom and use some of their energy. We also know that bad habits are hard to break. I do not blame this on teachers, I probably blame it on a lack of investment. Pupil:teacher ratios prevent PE classes for changing purposes. We see poor facilities and, I believe, a lack of creativity in our syllabus. We need to see fun activities that will engage these children and young people. This money could be used to expand on initiatives that are already operating and that would ultimately result in a mandatory two hours per week physical education programme and help keep their little

bodies healthy. No one wants to see their child overweight.

An excellent initiative has recently been piloted in my own constituency of Upper Bann. It is an innovative and creative programme aimed at getting our primary-school children fit and healthy. Healthy Kids has been running for two years and has already expanded into 17 local schools. Kevin Creery from Tannaghmore Primary School has spearheaded it, and he is on record as having said:

"he was astounded at the societal statistics regarding the inactivity of children and as a PE teacher he decided to do something about it."

The statistics clearly demonstrate that, within the UK, Northern Ireland has the least active children. With a group of individuals, Kevin put together a 16-week physical literacy programme, aimed not just at getting kids back to fitness but assessing their progress with detailed data and video analysis to show just how well the children have done. So far, the project has seen 942 children tested, and it is expected that 2,000 will be tested before Christmas.

The project has four strands: professional coaching in schools; the "golden mile", which enables children to run round their pitches for 15 minutes, twice a week; habit building; and performance monitoring. From this programme, there has clearly been an increase in children's stamina and speed. It is increasing their participation in competitive sports outside schools, and parents have also noticed that their children want to do more outside and to involve themselves in more physical exercise. We all know that we are in an era of electronic devices, and it is vitally important that we try and engage our children to enjoy the outside world as well.

Major studies have examined this issue and found a strong relationship between the amount of PE offered and a child's obesity risk and age-adjusted BMI. In the US, a study found that an extra 60 minutes of PE per week in primary schools lowers a child's age-adjusted BMI score by 10% and reduces the possibility of obesity by 5%.

In conclusion, we support the amendment, because ultimately it just continues what the motion calls for. There are a few statistics that I want to leave you with. Research by the University of Ulster shows that in 2004-05, only 5% of schools in Scotland offered two hours or more of PE; 10 years later, they are sitting at 98% participation in two hours of physical

education. The stark contrast is that Northern Ireland has only 8%. The Institute of Chartered Physiotherapists suggests that regular exercise can lead to better concentration, learning skills and self-esteem, and one major US study found that integrating moderate-intensity physical activity into academic lessons in primary school resulted in a 6% increase in performance in standardised academic tests.

The benefits of this money being ring-fenced for education are immeasurable, and I have no doubt that it will go a long way in creating a fitter, more active, higher-performing generation of young people. Whilst it will come to the Finance Department, this money will give an Education solution, but it will have immeasurable benefits for the Department of Health in the long run, so we are really cutting across the entire Government portfolio. Therefore, I ask Members to support the motion.

12.30 pm

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move

Leave out from "2018;" and insert

"notes with concern that only approximately 6% of pupils in each primary year are accessing two or more hours' physical education per week; calls on the Minister of Finance to ring-fence this money to fund an educational awareness and physical education programme in schools to benefit the long-term health of our children and to ease pressure on the health service; and further calls on the Minister of Education to improve the monitoring and reporting of physical education hours per week accessed by primary pupils and to issue a public consultation on the introduction of a statutory obligation on schools to facilitate an appropriate minimum amount of physical education hours per week for primary-school pupils." — [Mr Lyttle.]

I welcome the opportunity to debate this important matter, and I thank the proposers for bringing it to the Assembly. The issue of child health, physical education and activity is vital. I particularly welcome the opportunity to speak about it, as it is an issue that I have raised with various Education Ministers over the years. It is clear that we need to face up to the stark reality that, according to the most recent school omnibus survey, on average only 4% of our primary-school children are accessing the Department of Education's recommended two hours' physical education per week in our schools.

The debate is, of course, connected to the wider issue and national scandal of childhood obesity and overweight children. Here in Northern Ireland, 21% of children are classified as overweight and 7% as obese, which means that one in every four children is either overweight or obese. That has significant costs for the Northern Ireland economy and our health service and creates all those long-term health issues for our children and young people.

These are scandalous realities that should be as big a priority for the Executive, the Assembly, the media and our wider society as any of the issues that we face in the Assembly. Tackling those problems will of course require a multifaceted, international, national, regional and partnership approach, of which increased physical activity and taxing excessive sugar in drinks form only part.

It is worth noting that many people feel that the UK childhood obesity strategy falls far short of what is expected. Malcolm Clark of the children's food campaign has gone as far as calling it:

"a truly shocking abdication of the Government's duties to secure the health and future of the next generation"

Others, such as Professor Parveen Kumar of the BMA board of science, said that the strategy should have included other measures, such as tighter controls on irresponsible marketing and promotion.

Therefore, it is important that the Assembly and the Executive consider how we can influence a more robust UK and international approach to obesity, as well as the full range of measures that we can take in Northern Ireland to improve the health and well-being of our children. It will need to be a comprehensive approach, and that makes me somewhat cautious with the call to ring-fence funds just for educational awareness and physical education. There is a range of measures available: improved food labelling, early years nutrition intervention and support for our sports clubs that do tireless voluntary work across our community.

A range of Departments is responsible through various policies. The Department of Health has the Fitter Future for All strategy, which is the framework for preventing and addressing overweight problems and obesity in Northern Ireland. The Department of Health and the Department of Education share the food in schools policy. Access to free fruit and vegetables and greater access to free school

meals is something that has been successfully employed in other jurisdictions. The Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and the Department for Infrastructure's cycling unit promote the excellent Active School Travel and Safe Routes to Schools programme that also merit investment. Of course, the Department of Education has its own curriculum sports programme that the IFA and the GAA contribute to so ably.

I am somewhat cautious about the call for ring-fenced funding just for education, physical education and just the Department of Education, but I do assume that the spirit of the call is that the funds will be used wisely and effectively to promote child health and physical activity. Hence, we are willing to support that aspect of the motion, and indeed the motion and put forward the amendment.

The Department of Health's obesity prevention strategy, a Fitter Future for All, has a specific target of every child in Northern Ireland over the age of eight having at least two hours' per week extracurricular sport, physical recreation or play. That will be something for us to look at as well.

Most pertinent to today's motion is the Department of Education's recommendation that all pupils participate in at least two hours' PE per week. The shocking reality, from the figures that we have available to us, is that, on average, only 4% of primary pupils are accessing that recommendation. Furthermore, that is according to the school omnibus survey, which is not, as far as I am aware, mandatory, and, in 2015, was completed by only 36% of grant-aided schools. That is a totally unacceptable situation when we are dealing with such a serious issue. It is something that the Education Minister must take extremely seriously. I had hoped that the Education Minister would be here today, given how many of these issues fall across his responsibility. Hopefully, it is something that we will hear from him on at an urgent future date.

The first step, as set out by the amendment today, is for the Executive to accept that they are failing our children and that this is an exceptional problem that will require exceptional action. According to the Chest Heart and Stroke organisation, further to the establishment of open, transparent and firm targets and investment in PE support, 98% of Scottish primary schools offer at least two hours per week of PE. That is compared with 4% to 7% in Northern Ireland. Of course we need to allocate additional resources wisely and effectively, but it is also clear that the Assembly

requires significant improvements in the monitoring and information available to us to hold the Executive to account. It is clear that the non-mandatory omnibus survey is not the comprehensive information that we need.

We are often asked for specifics by the Executive. Chest Heart and Stroke recommends that, by 2021, 70% of primary-school pupils should be able to access at least two hours of high-quality PE each week. We should have a network of specialist PE facilitators to monitor all primary schools on the extent to which they have met the two-hour target and to report specifically in inspection reports on whether that target is met. Importantly, as the proposer of the motion stated, it is vital that we equip and support our teachers and schools to meet those important targets. Therefore, we should have a PE fund that will award grants and assistance to our primary schools to be able to meet that need.

This is one of the greatest challenges facing our society. I propose that the Education Minister, in partnership with Executive colleagues if that is helpful, initiates and facilitates a public consultation as to how we properly address this unacceptable situation, how best we utilise and allocate any additional resources we receive and whether we need to change the failing guideline of two hours' PE per week per pupil to a statutory obligation. The Assembly must show that it is willing to get serious in its response to the issue and fight to improve access to the good nutrition, balanced diets and physical activity that our children and young people need and deserve.

Mr McElduff: I begin with a few remarks from my perspective as Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The Committee has not taken a formal position on the issues covered by the motion, so my remarks in this section of my speech, before I make some remarks as a Sinn Féin MLA, are designed to inform the House's understanding of related matters.

Of course, physical education is a compulsory element of the revised curriculum for all pupils from foundation stage, which is preschool, to Key Stage 4, which is GCSE. Schools are encouraged to provide at least two hours of PE every week. The delivery of all aspects of the curriculum is, however, a matter for schools. The Department does not compel schools to require pupils to undertake PE, even if we think that they should. The decision on what specific sports or games are offered to pupils and the funding allocated to chosen sports or games is also a matter for each school. The curriculum

sports programme is a DE programme not unfamiliar to you, Principal Deputy Speaker. It has been in place since 2007. It is designed to develop the physical literacy skills of our youngest children through participation in enjoyable sports activities, to help to raise children's confidence and self-esteem and to raise the confidence and skills of primary-school teachers in delivering physical education.

The Gaelic Athletic Association and the Irish Football Association have provided a network of qualified coaches who work with children at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 in primary schools. At one point, there were 61 coaches in 571 primary schools in the North, reaching over 39,000 pupils, which is 41% of younger children participating. Those two sporting organisations led the way in that sense. Priority was to be given to schools in which children were likely to benefit most from curriculum-linked physical activity, in particular schools in disadvantaged areas. It is my understanding that the programme cost about £1.3 million per annum.

John O'Dowd will be my party's next contributor to the debate, and he will make more of the points that I will briefly state now. Sinn Féin feels that the tone and sentiment of the motion is good and positive, but we believe that ring-fencing Barnett consequentials through individual motions of this nature is not good budgetary practice. Sin an méid.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and commend its signatories for bringing it to the House. In March, the then Health Minister, Simon Hamilton, expressed this concern:

"a levy on sugar-sweetened drinks might simply cause people to switch to other unhealthy foods, with the result that the problem is displaced but not solved." — [Official Report (Hansard), 15 March 2016, p87, col 2].

Setting aside his concerns during the Final Stage of the Health (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill that it is a regressive tax, he is right that the revenue made available as a result of the tax should be utilised to increase public health, and where better to start than with our children?

I agree entirely that funding should be set aside for this purpose, because instilling healthy lifestyle choices in our young people will result in short- and long-term health benefits. We know that eating a balanced diet, taking regular

exercise and maintaining a healthy weight can add years to your life and reduce the risk of certain diseases, including cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity — the list goes on and on. Not only does a healthy lifestyle bring short-term benefits to the health of our young people, but it delivers skills, knowledge and practice that will live on through generations of our people. If the Executive get it right when it comes to the health of our young people, that will deliver not only countless benefits to families and public health but financial savings by reducing pressure on an already over-pressurised health service and the excellent staff —

Mr Lyons: I appreciate the Member giving way, and I appreciate my colleague bringing the motion here today. Is it not true that early intervention and prevention should happen not just for obesity but right across the health service? If we can tackle these issues now, we can make massive savings and save people an awful lot of pain and suffering at the same time.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his intervention. Early intervention is key right across, as you state.

If the Executive get it right on the health of our young people, that will deliver countless benefits and reduce the pressure, as I said. I pay tribute to the excellent staff who work in our health service every day.

I have heard it said many times that your health is your wealth, but I would extend that description: our people's health is Northern Ireland's wealth. There is a clear and direct link between healthy eating, healthy living and a healthy economy.

Last week, I had the honour of hosting writer, cook and friend, Jilly Dougan, as she launched her new initiative, 'Sow, Grow, Munch', in the Long Gallery. It is an inspirational new book and online tool that connects children of all ages with the concepts of food growing, food heritage, the importance of buying local produce and how to cook it from scratch. It is precisely the sort of initiative that we should encourage for our children and young people. I thank the MLAs who attended and supported Jilly at her launch. The breadth of attendance at that event gives a flavour of the organisations whose input is crucial when it comes to encouraging healthier choices amongst children: the Public Health Agency, the Food

Standards Agency, the Belfast Food Network, Northern Ireland Environment Link, the Department of Justice, Eco-Schools, the Education for Sustainable Development Forum, the Health and Social Care Board and the Ulster Farmers' Union were there, to name but a few. Promoting healthier lifestyles amongst our children is not a stand-alone job for the Education Minister or the Health Minister. If we are to achieve the best results, there must be a combined effort across government with input from the private and voluntary sectors.

12.45 pm

Skills learned in childhood last a lifetime, and the pace of life seems to increase year on year, with quick-fix solutions often meaning that healthy lifestyle choices are given less thought than they should be. The choices made have a long-term consequence for families and, indeed, for the health service. Health choices have less prominence in the child's life and therefore less impact on them physically and mentally. On the flip side, promoting healthier living will have long-term positive benefits for families.

I thank the Members who tabled the motion and encourage the Finance Minister to support the concept of an approach to promoting healthier lifestyles amongst our children. That approach should include government, the private sector and the voluntary sector.

Mr Durkan: As health spokesperson for our party, I support the motion and the amendment. It is as health spokesperson that I have been appointed to speak on the motion, although I tried to extricate myself from doing so by arguing that this is much wider than a Department of Health issue. The presence of the Finance Minister to respond to the debate indicates that the Executive get that, which is to be welcomed.

What we have heard today demonstrates clearly that the key to reducing the massive, overwhelming pressure on the health system lies not in the Department of Health but elsewhere. Education has a key role, and that is reflected in the motion and expanded on in the amendment. The statistic cited by Mr Lyttle and others — only 4% of children in school get the required amount of physical exercise — is shocking. Look at what happens in Scotland, home of the deep-fried Mars bar: compared with the exercise that they get, we really have an awful lot of catching up to do.

Mr F McCann: A Mars a day.

Mr Durkan: I know that Fra is a big fan. *[Laughter.]* The benefits of exercise are much more than physical. That does not apply just to young people, but it certainly applies to them in terms of the benefits to one's mental health. Young people learn when they are involved in sports, particularly team sports. They learn about social cohesion and how to interact with others. They learn the value of things such as teamwork that are invaluable as they go on in life. The link between —

Mr McNulty: Will the Member give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Members who tabled the motion. Last night, you may have seen Tomás Ó Sé, a guy whom I had the honour of playing football against, on 'Claire Byrne Live Extras'. Having identified a lack of education on diet and lack of exercise in primary schools, he has instigated a programme that is starting to educate young people about the sugar content of their food and the importance of exercise. It has had tremendously positive effects on young people, not alone on their health but on their self-esteem. The power of sport and exercise in developing kids and improving their health is enormous, and it is very positive in developing their self-esteem and character.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. I remind Members that interventions are meant to be brief.

Mr Durkan: I thought that I might have got more than an extra minute for that one.

The link between exercise and healthy eating is inextricable. Much has been done in the area of healthy eating, such as what is available and on offer to young people in schools and, importantly, what is not.

While we have heard — the sugar tax might be a case in point — of increasing the price of foods that are deemed unhealthy, I would like to see us do more work to reduce the price of healthier foods, making them more accessible and certainly more affordable for young people. I know that there are young people in my constituency who are maybe four or five years old and have never eaten a banana or an apple. It is frightening to think that.

School is only part of the picture, and that is a point that Mr Lyttle made very well. I think that it is also reflected in a briefing I got from John McBride from the Royal College of Paediatrics

and Child Health, who said that one in five children in the UK is overweight or obese by the time they start school. So, obviously, there is work to be done with parents through early years programmes. I always say that the early years are not quite Vegas, because whatever happens there does not stay there; it carries on throughout life.

More needs to be done to educate and empower parents. We have to recognise that there are challenges for parents bringing up children today, and any parents in the Chamber will recognise the demands on them and the demands from children. Exercise is competing against TV and on-demand cartoons — you do not just have them for an hour a day any more — computers and consoles. Also, we have to recognise the pressures on children today. I think we have to be mindful that, while there is a lot of talk about obesity and children being overweight, we are also seeing huge, increased pressure on children — boys and girls — to have the perfect body, and we are seeing an increase in the number of young people — again, girls and boys — with eating disorders as a result and other mental health issues.

The importance of physical activity cannot be understated. The importance of a healthy and balanced diet is also huge. We have to do all we can to ensure that the next generation get both. Schools have a massive role to play, and we have to ensure that they get the support to do so. There are the Sure Start and early years programmes, which need to be supported too, as well as —

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

Mr Durkan: — other external sporting and community organisations.

Mr O'Dowd: As my colleague Barry McElduff said, the principles behind this motion are very good. Who could argue against, first, a sugar tax? It has long been the practice of Government to set their social agenda either through taxation or legislation. Given the impact that sugar, particularly white sugar, is having on humanity, it is only right and proper that the Government try to shape attitudes towards it through taxation.

The question arises as to who should have the right to place that tax and how that tax is raised and spent. I firmly argue that that decision should be a matter for the Executive through tax-raising and tax-varying powers. However, the Westminster Government have introduced a

tax, and they are telling the devolved institutions here, in Scotland and in Wales how that tax will be implemented and raised and what level it will be set at. I think that it would be foolish for us to move straight away, before we know the exact level of revenue that will be raised and the implications of ring-fencing it, to pass an Assembly motion that calls for the ring-fencing of approximately £18 million. I assume that that is per annum. That is quite a significant investment by the Executive, and we are going to call for it to be ring-fenced after a one-and-a-half-hour debate.

I know that there is a lot of research out there on the benefits of a sugar tax policy, and there is also research on the benefits of physical education, education and a well-educated workforce. I fully support the principle — a number of Members addressed this — that it is not solely the responsibility of the health service to look after the health and well-being of citizens: that is the responsibility of the entire Executive. If you have citizens in good jobs, living in good accommodation in good environments, who have access to leisure activities and are content in their lives, you will, by and large, have a healthier population than you would otherwise. However, if I am going to be asked to invest £18 million of public funds, or £14 million or £12 million or £10 million or whatever it turns out to be, in a specific area of our public services, then I want a policy to back it up. I want the research to back up the policy, and then the money should follow all of that. We are putting the cart before the horse in these circumstances.

Unfortunately, our schools are underfunded because our Executive are underfunded. However, our schools are currently funded to provide physical education, and they also have access to a number of schemes and additional funding from the Department of Education to provide after-school activities, particularly in socially deprived areas, which can and should promote good health and well-being. If we are going to add an additional £18 million to that, then I want the policy and research to back that up.

There is a bigger fundamental question here in relation to how we set our Budgets. The Finance Minister sets the Budget on behalf of the Executive. The Executive agree the Budget. We have had much debate in recent months about a new style of Programme for Government which should have outcomes. To have outcomes from a Programme for Government, we need a Budget to back up those outcomes. The Programme for Government has not been decided on yet. The

consultation is complete, and the Executive will come forward with a finalised Programme for Government and present it to the House. The fundamental question is this: why would we bring in the practice of ring-fencing Barnett consequentials ahead of our Programme for Government? That is the wrong way to do Budgets and the wrong way to do business.

Ms Lockhart: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes.

Ms Lockhart: I appreciate the way in which the Member has outlined his position, but my concern is that £18 million is not a significant amount of money in the grander scheme of things. I do not want to see this £18 million go into the ether and disappear. It needs to be quite a focused activity and programme.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Beidh nóiméad eile ag an gComhalta. The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr O'Dowd: I appreciate that the intentions behind the motion are good. There is no argument against the intentions of investing a tax to combat obesity into the health and well-being of our children. The principle behind it is good, but I want to put the £18 million in context. One million pounds will hire 30 teachers for a year, approximately 30 nurses for a year or, probably, 50 classroom assistants for a year. I know that when we get into the habit of talking in billions, millions seem irrelevant, but they do the task when you put them into the right order.

I fully appreciate the principle behind the motion and its intention, but if we are going to have a Programme for Government with outcomes, then the Budget has to follow the Programme for Government. That is the way that we should deal with our budgetary processes, through the order that is set out —

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: Can the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Dowd: — so that the outcomes from the Programme for Government ensure that our young people have access to healthy lifestyles.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. The debate will

resume after Question Time, and the next speaker will be Philip Smith.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Mr Speaker: We start with listed questions.

Lakeland Dairies: Banbridge Plant

1. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement his Department, or its agencies, have had with Lakeland Dairies in relation to the status and future viability of its Banbridge plant. (AQO 434/16-21)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister for the Economy):

I met with Mr Michael Hanley, the chief executive of Lakeland Dairies, in the immediate aftermath of the announcement regarding the Banbridge plant. In June 2014, Invest NI offered Armaghdown Creameries financial assistance of £750,000 in support of a £15.6 million capital investment project, which primarily involved the installation of equipment to enable the heat treatment of milk powder, the manufacture of products featuring low spores, and extending the shelf life of its product portfolio. Only £70,000 of the offer has been drawn down.

In August 2015, it was announced that Lakeland Dairies and the Fane Valley Group were in discussions to create a dairy joint venture with a view to enhancing economies of scale, improving efficiencies, and helping to underpin milk prices for dairy farmers. Following that announcement, Invest NI had extensive communication with Fane Valley regarding the implementation of the investment and amending the offer to allow the new proposed joint-venture company to avail of its support. An amendment to the offer was issued to Fane Valley in March 2016, allowing it to draw down the offer upon completion of the joint venture.

In May 2016, Invest NI became aware that the proposed joint venture had become a sale, with Lakeland Dairies acquiring Armaghdown

Creameries and the milk pool outright. I, and my officials in Invest NI, have met Lakeland Dairies and offered to novate the letter of support on several occasions since then. In August, Lakeland Dairies announced a 30-day consultation on ceasing production in the winter months. Since the announcement of the consultation period, the employment service in my Department has actively engaged with Armaghdown Creameries. Out of the 70 employees, 57 have taken voluntary redundancy and three are being redeployed in the group.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for his answer and his confirmation that there has been assistance offered to the previous and to the current owners through investment from Invest NI to secure the future of the plant. Is the Minister aware that there is speculation in the community, now that the plant is closed, that the seasonal operation will not reopen in the springtime of 2017? Will he ask Invest NI to redouble its efforts with the current owners to ensure that every option for investment in the plant is investigated and that the owners are aware that investment is on the table for them?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to point out, and I sought to do this in my answer, that we have made offers of support and that there is a history of making and remaking offers of support. In the meeting that I had with Mr Hanley immediately after the announcement, whilst looking into the history of the issue, I made it clear to him directly face to face that we would be prepared to look at the offer again, do whatever was required, and perhaps even enhance the support if it would secure employment at the Banbridge plant. That was not met with a favourable response on that occasion, not least because the scale of investment required in the plant far exceeds what the group is prepared to engage in.

As for rumours or talk in the local area, that is not something that I have heard, and it is certainly not what I have heard directly from the company. My understanding is that 10 employees have been retained on-site as a skeleton staff to keep the plant ticking over for the winter period before seasonal work comes back next year. That is what I have been told. The fact that 10 staff have been retained at least points positively in that direction, and clearly we will continue to engage, at my level and at an official level, with Lakeland Dairies to ensure that they do what they say they will do. If there is any further support that they want to avail of, we will meet that with a positive

response by engaging with them to see whether there is anything we can do.

Mrs Dobson: Minister, you will be aware that I wrote to you in August on behalf of the Banbridge employees, many with over 20 years' service to the company, who were concerned about their future and that of their families. Does the Minister share my condemnation of a company from the Republic of Ireland purchasing the creamery to great fanfare in May only to close it in September? What steps will he take to avoid future piracy in the dairy industry?

Mr Hamilton: Those are very strong terms from the Member, and she is of course free to use those terms if she wants. I am not going to get into the business of condemning any business. I am concerned, and that is why I got involved in the issue immediately on hearing the news. I have concerns about how this has worked out and developed over recent months. I wanted to get involved directly in it and make that offer to the company that the support that was on the books was still there and, indeed, said that we would look at further support if that was something that the company wanted to avail itself of. I am not going to get into the business of condemning any company for decisions that they make when we are not in their position and cannot look at the fullness of the situation that they face. It is very easy for us to sit here and condemn them without understanding the entirety of what they had to deal with. My job is, first, to work with the now former employees to make sure that they have all the support that they require, but it is also to try to work with the company and indeed other companies to ensure that an agri-food sector in Northern Ireland that has been buoyant continues to flourish.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Minister for his very keen interest in this matter. I brought it to his attention when the news broke, and I really appreciate him coming down to the constituency and meeting the organisation. What steps are the Department's employment services taking to assist the employees in Banbridge to find or prepare for new employment?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question. I put on record my praise for her for being quick off the mark and inviting me down to her constituency to meet management from Lakeland Dairies. We did that a couple of days after the news first broke. The Member was there and can testify that all sorts of offers of support and assistance were made to the

company, and those remain very much on the books.

My first priority is not to condemn the company but to ensure that the staff working at the Banbridge plant get all the support that they require in what is a very difficult time for them. Almost immediately, the employment services and Careers Service in my Department engaged with the staff at the Banbridge plant. They held a number of clinics to provide advice and support around job seeking, interview techniques, CV development and the sort of things that you would expect, as well as to provide information packs to guide them through what was a very difficult time for them.

As I mentioned in response to Mr O'Dowd, 57 staff have taken voluntary redundancy, three have been redeployed within the group, and 10 have been retained as a skeleton staff to maintain the factory. I understand that some of those who have taken voluntary redundancy have found employment elsewhere, particularly in the agri-food sector in the locality. We will continue to work with those staff and ensure that all of that support is available to them on an ongoing basis so that they can get back into the world of work as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: I must inform the House that questions 2 and 9 have been withdrawn within the agreed limits.

Marching Bands: Tourism Potential

3. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister for the Economy how he will ensure that the tourism potential of local marching bands is maximised. (AQO 436/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Since 2006, Tourism Northern Ireland has been working with the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland to help maximise the tourism potential of the flagship Twelfth parades. Tourism NI has worked in partnership with the flagship parades to provide tailored world host training. This training was specifically designed to facilitate engagement between marching bands and visitors. The aim was to equip parade participants with local product knowledge to enable them to maximise the tourism opportunity arising from local parades. This year, the Royal Black Institution's 13 July event at Scarva received support through the National Tourism Events Sponsorship Scheme and leveraged further funding through the Northern Ireland Year of Food and Drink tourism events scheme. This event and Twelfth of July celebrations and Orangefest were promoted on the Tourism

Northern Ireland website
discovernorthernireland.com.

Research tells us that international visitors are interested in our heritage and culture. Potential visitors to Northern Ireland are already looking for information to inform their travel decisions for 2017. It is therefore important that marching bands are integrated into the local tourism offer and to make sure that they are included in the 'What's On' events guide so that they can become a valuable part of the overall tourism experience. Funding is available through the Tourism NI events fund, which is currently open for applications. I encourage any marching bands that are interested in showcasing themselves to a tourism market to apply to this fund, providing that they meet the criteria.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you referred to Scarva. You are well familiar with the demonstration and event that takes place there each and every year, with an attendance of up to 100,000 people and many bands participating. What is your assessment of Scarva's tourism potential?

Mr Hamilton: Mr Speaker, if I may, I want to put on the record my sadness at the passing of Drew Nelson, which we learned of in the past 24 hours. A lot of the positive work being taken forward by the Orange Institution and the loyal orders owes a lot to Drew, particularly the development of the tourism potential of the institution and our loyal orders. If it had not been for Drew and his leadership, that would not have happened. We mourn his passing and will certainly miss his leadership in the Orange Institution and the wider family of loyal orders.

To answer Mr Anderson's question, there is huge potential for Scarva, which is a very special event. The Member will be able to testify that it is an excellent day out. The best marching bands from across Northern Ireland and further afield come to Scarva on 13 July. You have the sham fight taking place in a lovely setting in what is a beautiful village for it. That potential is measured by the fact that, in 2015 and again in 2016 — the Member knows Scarva very well: it is a very small village — around 100,000 people visited Scarva on 13 July. It is an event with huge numbers, and that brings with it huge potential. That is why, in the 2015-16 financial year, Tourism NI backed the event for the first time to the tune of £20,000, with a further £15,000 this year. It is why we are using it to market the Northern Ireland Year of Food and Drink as well. I want to see that potential developed further with infrastructure, particularly around car parking and perhaps seating for the event, and I want to try to attract

tour buses to get people to Scarva for the day. It is a huge event that is very successful already, and I look forward to working with the Royal Black Institution to take it further.

Mr Butler: I welcome the Minister's comments thus far and his willingness to work with the Department for Communities in support of marching bands and a tourism strategy. Will he further undertake to ensure that the Ulster-Scots Agency is suitably supported to ensure that this important area of our Northern Irish culture is fully recognised?

Mr Hamilton: I absolutely agree with the Member. He is right: it is not entirely my Department's responsibility or duty to develop the tourism potential of either marching bands or Ulster-Scots heritage and culture. It spans a lot of Departments. The Member mentions the Department for Communities, and I am glad that the Minister for Communities has reintroduced the scheme to support the purchase of musical instruments by marching bands. I think that is around £200,000 a year.

The Member is right about the need to work with the Ulster-Scots Agency, and we have a very good relationship with it in the Department and through Tourism NI. I have already had some discussions during my time in office about how we can expand the potential. I mentioned some of the areas in which support had been given through Tourism NI, but support has also been given to the Belfast Tattoo, which is a hugely successful event now — it is now almost a fixed event in our calendar — as well as various pipe band championships. Some people maybe have a fixed view — an unfortunately fixed view — of marching bands, but the Member and other Members will appreciate that it goes much broader. It is quite a broad and expansive culture, and I am pleased that Tourism NI has continued to support it. I want it to do a lot more of that and develop it much further into the years ahead.

Mr Murphy: I am tempted to ask the Minister how he can minimise the impact of some of the marching bands on our tourism product. Nonetheless, at the moment, I am sure, he will be putting together his tourism strategy, through which we hope to see a significant upturn in the number of visitors and the input from tourism into the local economy. Has he been able to come up with a cost for a successful tourism strategy and presented it to the Executive?

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that the Member will agree with me that we should celebrate all our culture in Northern Ireland. People from

outside Northern Ireland are interested in our culture, and, through Tourism NI and, indeed, Tourism Ireland, we have been trying to market and promote that so that, regardless of what part of the world people are from and what their family background is, there is something here that they will be interested in. We want that to be developed, professional and world-class, and we want there to be something for everyone. I am sure that the Member would agree that we must do that. It must also be part of any tourism strategy.

2.15 pm

The Member is right that the Department is in the process of developing a tourism strategy for Northern Ireland. I want it to be ambitious. In the last number of years, we have seen significant growth in our tourism sector. In the last year, we recorded the highest ever level of external visitors to Northern Ireland, and I want to push on and build on that recent success. That will require some bold vision for tourism in Northern Ireland. We already have some fantastic products, such as Titanic Belfast and the Giant's Causeway, and lots of other parts of our tourism infrastructure have been developing positively and attracting people from around the world. We need to be bold and imaginative with hotels and air links and how we can further develop our infrastructure. It was great to see the Heaney HomePlace opening last week. That is another thing that adds to our overall tourism product.

The Member is right to identify that that will come at some cost, and I have been considering that cost with officials. I have not yet put a final figure on that, and it will obviously depend on what resources are available. A sector proven to be doing well is one that the Executive and, indeed, the Assembly as a whole would want to support, particularly if there is a bold, ambitious and forward-looking tourism strategy that we can all follow.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. May I add to the tourist event that is Scarva the Orange pageant at Carrickfergus Castle? Sadly, Minister, there is a very dark and sometimes very negative side to some bands and, indeed, to organisations that march around the Province of Northern Ireland. What actions will you take to deal with the negative image that many of these events conjure up? I encourage you to support events such as the Orange pageant in Carrickfergus and others that send out a more positive signal.

Mr Hamilton: I am very familiar with the Orange pageant in Carrickfergus. I have attended it a couple of times over the last number of years. It is a great day out, a great family day out. I also attend it to see David Hilditch dressed in period costume. Members, it is worth it for that alone. I encourage Members on all sides of the House to attend just to see David dressed as the Mayor of Carrickfergus, which, of course, he was in recent times.

Mr Lyons: The king of Carrickfergus.

Mr Hamilton: "The king of Carrickfergus", somebody said. That is probably a more appropriate title.

It is a great event. Perhaps the Member or others have encouraged this: they look at events on all sides of our culture that hit the headlines for the wrong reasons, but they are few and far between. The Member will be aware that a vast number — the overwhelming majority — of loyal order parades throughout the year pass off peacefully and without incident. Sometimes we forget that. That is particularly so around the Twelfth, 13 July and other significant dates in our marching season. They are family events and have been increasingly so over the last number of years, and that has been to do with the far-sighted vision and leadership of people such as Drew Nelson. We owe it to him and his legacy to continue with that work over the next number of years.

I do not have a musical note in my head, but I admire the dedication of the people in our marching bands, who, weekend after weekend and throughout the week, practise and then go out to display their talent. We should acknowledge it as something that people are dedicated to, and wonderful discipline comes from that. If there is a tourism benefit, as I believe there is, we should seek to exploit that to the maximum.

Global Air Links

4. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline any discussions his Department is having to increase global air links from Northern Ireland. (AQO 437/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: Air connectivity is an important driver of economic growth in Northern Ireland and provides access to key markets for investment, exports and tourism. I am keen to support our airports to improve Northern Ireland's air connectivity, particularly where a

route can provide benefits to the wider economy. For example, we have provided support to United Airlines to secure Northern Ireland's only transatlantic connection to the United States, and the Executive have announced a £7 million package for the north-west to assist with the development and growth of the City of Derry Airport.

I am encouraged by the recent growth of 8% in the number of passengers passing through Northern Ireland's airports in the year to March 2016. I look forward to seeing that trend continue in line with economic conditions and seeing increased air connectivity from Northern Ireland. I welcome recent positive developments in the sector, including the establishment of a Ryanair base at Belfast International and the launch of a new connection to Brussels from Belfast City Airport.

Belfast has also been successful in its bid to host Routes Europe in April 2017; it is a major aviation conference that brings together decision makers from airlines, airports and tourism authorities.

My officials are in regular contact with all Northern Ireland's airports to support them in their route development endeavours. We are exploring all options to expand our air access by developing strategic links to promote economic and tourism development in Northern Ireland. I will consider any proposal for a route with business or inbound tourism potential that can benefit our economy.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Did he use the opportunity of his recent visit to the United Arab Emirates to seek to develop an air route from Northern Ireland to the Middle East? I thank him for mentioning Eglinton as well.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I was pleased that the Executive were able to come forward with a package of support for City of Derry Airport, which is an incredibly important gateway to the north-west. Whilst the airport has had some difficulties, I hope that the package will attract in a new airline or airlines and enhance connectivity to the north-west.

The short answer to the Member's question on whether I used the opportunity of my visit to the Middle East last week to promote and to seek to develop air connectivity to Northern Ireland is that I did. The issue came up, even without my pushing it, time and time again, particularly in conversation with people from Northern Ireland

who are doing business in the Middle East. They see the huge potential of exporting into the region, as we discussed in our debate on trade and exports yesterday. Whilst there are other connections that they can take, they know that there is huge potential not only for tourism — Middle East tourists tend to be very high spenders and travel in large groups — but for business. If we had a direct connection to the Middle East, there would be huge opportunities to grow trade as a result.

I am fully aware of the importance of air links, and not just from the point of view of tourism, outbound or inbound: routes with bigger planes, in particular, are hugely important for boosting trade. We made some very useful contacts when we were in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, both of which are home to major airlines that continue to grow. I want to make sure that we are talking to key decision makers in those airlines over the coming months. Contact was made in the past, but I want to ensure that, as they seek to expand further, they hear from Belfast and City of Derry about tourism and trade potential in Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I place on record my gratitude for the Executive's intervention and investment in City of Derry Airport. Will the Minister inform the House whether he or the Executive have any plans, working in conjunction with Derry City and Strabane District Council, to encourage and increase the use of City of Derry Airport?

Mr Hamilton: The Member will know better than me of the challenges facing that airport over the last number of years. It was regrettable that Ryanair pulled out of City of Derry, albeit moving a lot of operations to Belfast International, which bolsters that airport. Clearly, we want connectivity to be maintained into the north-west, which is why the Executive were innovative and bold in doing what we did and in putting a mixed package of support forward for City of Derry Airport. We want to work very closely with it and the council. There has been a lot of contact with the council over the last number of weeks to try to attract in another airline or several airlines to solidify and affirm the position of City of Derry Airport and increase connectivity from the region.

The Member referred to our "intervention", and, over the last number of months, I came to a quick and firm view that, while these airports are not our responsibility — they are private entities that are not in our ownership — we as an Executive need to be a little bit more interventionist sometimes and not heed the advice of others. We need to be directly

involved in trying to attract routes to Northern Ireland. It is my experience that, if we are not involved, we do not win; everybody else is getting directly involved and intervening. If Northern Ireland does not see its airports as strategic assets, we will not win, succeed or increase connectivity, and nor will we get the benefits in inbound tourism or trade that we hope for and expect.

Mr Aiken: Would the Minister like to see how the aviation sector could be appropriately incentivised, given suitable business cases, to encourage the establishment of additional air routes, particularly to North America and Europe? I welcome the news about the Middle East. While he is doing that, I would also like the Minister, along with his Executive colleagues, to urgently investigate what many consider to be the unfair and uncompetitive practices that are now being adopted by the Dublin Airport Authority. In supporting increased global air links, will he support the scrapping —

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

Mr Aiken: — of air passenger duty (APD) and the improvement of road and rail links?

Mr Hamilton: I think that I counted about three questions there, Mr Speaker. I will try my best to answer them in the time that is available to me.

Again, there is a perception, perhaps, that we are not doing well in attracting air routes. We have always got to remember that this is a small region with a population of 1.8 million. It will be difficult to attract and have the volume of traffic, whether that be from tourism or trade, to justify routes to all parts of the world. That is why it is important that we are strategic in seeking routes to important areas. That is why I said in response to Mr Robinson's question that the Middle East is a gateway to that broader region and, indeed, into the Far East. It is an incredibly important place that we should be working on.

In recent times, we have attracted direct flights to Brussels and Amsterdam out of the City Airport and to Berlin and Milan out of the International Airport. There has been success in attracting routes, particularly into key markets. It was interesting that, when I was up at the International Airport welcoming the Berlin route, there were as many people coming from Germany to Northern Ireland as going out to it. It was not one of these routes whereby people

leave Northern Ireland, spend their money there and come back; it was one where there was two-way traffic.

Those routes have been secured in spite of air passenger duty, which has obviously been waived at a cost to the Executive for long-haul flights. It is disappointing that, with the exception of a few charters, that has not yielded a permanent long-haul route over and above the United Airlines flight to Newark. Clearly, work continues to target key routes into places like Canada and the Middle East, as I have mentioned. I will continue to do that and to have all the conversations that I possibly can to try to attract various airlines. Indeed, I have already had some.

I think that APD should be scrapped. It works against peripheral regions like Northern Ireland. It is incumbent upon Her Majesty's Government to do in Northern Ireland what they have done with the highlands and islands of Scotland and scrap it specifically for that. They should take the burden for doing that, having introduced it in the first place.

Ms Archibald: The Minister mentioned United Airlines in his previous answer. How has his Department ensured that there is value for money from the Executive's contribution to ensuring that the link between Belfast and the USA is sustained?

Mr Hamilton: We were faced with a very difficult set of circumstances, as the Member will appreciate and understand. Back in the summer, with the threat of the imminent withdrawal of our only transatlantic flight, I took the decision, which was backed and supported by the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and indeed other Members in the House, that it was too important to Northern Ireland to let it go and lose it. We obviously offered the support that we did. I took a very clear view very quickly that Northern Ireland needed to retain its only direct transatlantic route, but I also take the view, as I mentioned in response to other Members, that we need to work very hard to ensure that it is not our only transatlantic route or direct long-haul route to key strategic markets. Work will continue to develop other routes, as well as trying to ensure that the United Airlines flight remains.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Allister for a quick question and a quick response from the Minister.

Mr Allister: Has the Minister any concerns that the generosity of the Executive's multi-million-

pound bailout for the Newark route will leave us hostage to similar expectations and pressure from other operators and future operators?

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that the Member asked the question having not wanted to lose the direct transatlantic flight to Newark. As I mentioned in the previous answer, we were faced with a very difficult and challenging set of circumstances back in the summer. We took the decision that we did. There was a broad team approach, both from the private sector and across the political sector, to taking that decision. I believe that we did the right thing. Some may disagree with that, but I think that it was fundamentally the right thing to do to maintain Northern Ireland's only direct transatlantic route.

2.30 pm

I am willing to work with any and all operators to develop routes from Northern Ireland, particularly to key strategic markets, and I want to be a bit more directly involved and interventionist in doing that, as it is clear to me that other regions do it. If we want to increase and enhance our connectivity — I am sure that everybody in all corners of the House would agree that that is a good thing for Northern Ireland — we will have to be more directly involved in doing that. I have already had engagement with some airlines, and, indeed, with all the airports, and I look forward to more over the weeks and months ahead. Hopefully, that will bear fruit in more routes from Belfast and from City of Derry.

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

Medical School: North-west

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether he has had any discussions, either with his colleague the Health Minister or the university, about the establishment of a medical school in the north-west. (AQT 316/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I have not had any discussions in my current position with the Minister or with the colleagues whom the Member mentions, although it is something that I am familiar with from my time as Health Minister. I am seeking to draw on my knowledge from that time.

There was a very good proposal, although it was in its infancy and early stages and required

significant development by the university, to open a graduate medical school in the north-west. That was a good and positive thing that could address two issues in particular. One was high locum costs in the Western Trust area — I have now reverted quickly to my previous role, as the Member will notice — and an issue with general practice, which was raised by Paula Bradley in the House yesterday. Those issues are pertinent to the Western Trust area.

I have not had the discussions that the Member has had, but I expect that we will have discussions as the university develops its plans and ideas for a graduate medical school in the north-west.

Mr Durkan: I recall in a previous role words of support for this proposal from the Minister. Can the Minister now give the Assembly an assurance of his commitment to making this medical school a reality?

Mr Hamilton: I will give the same view now as I did when I was Health Minister, which is that I very much support in principle the idea of developing a graduate medical school in the north-west, as it made sense for the health reasons that I mentioned. Obviously, that has to be done in connection with available finances and all the requisite business cases and so forth. In principle, however, absolutely it is something that I support, and I look forward to working with the university, and, indeed, colleagues to make it happen.

Manufacturing Sector: BRES Assessment

T2. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for the Economy for his thoughts on the recently published annual business register and employment survey's (BRES) assessment of the manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland. (AQT 317/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: The manufacturing sector has been the subject of debates, discussions and questions in the House over the last number of months. The survey and the register show very good results for the sector. I reiterate that I would not come to the House and dismiss for a second issues such as the impact of the loss of 200 to 250 jobs at Caterpillar, which will affect the Member's constituency, or, indeed, at Bombardier or some of the other well-publicised job losses, particularly in the Ballymena area. I would not for a second say that they were unimportant; they have had serious and significant impacts, particularly for the people affected. However, as I have said in the House,

and publicly as well, it belies a positive trend in the overall manufacturing sector, and the register shows that clearly.

There was an overall increase in Northern Ireland of some 7,750 jobs, which is 1·1%, between September 2014 and September 2015. In the manufacturing sector in particular, which we are told is a sunset sector and is on its way out, there was an increase of 3,162 manufacturing jobs over that one-year period, which is a 4·1% increase. Interestingly, the construction sector, again a sector that has struggled, was up by over 4% as well.

Notwithstanding the impact of job losses in Caterpillar, Bombardier and elsewhere, it is continued good news for Northern Ireland, especially in manufacturing. It is interesting to see that it is areas like mid-Ulster and the west of the Province that have the highest percentage of manufacturing jobs in the whole of Northern Ireland. Again, that belies an impression that many would have. We have to continue to work closely with our manufacturing sector to ensure that we can not only mitigate the impact of those job losses but actually continue to grow our sector in the way that we have been doing over the last number of years.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome the positive news, irrespective of some of the negative, large announcements that have been made recently. What does the register say about the wider labour market in Northern Ireland?

Mr Hamilton: The overall picture is a good one. Data from September 2014 to September 2015 show a 1·1% increase in overall employment levels; that is a good thing and is to be celebrated. It follows more recent data that show that the employment levels continue to rise and are at the highest level since 2009.

One of the most interesting statistics that you can draw from the register this year is the public/private sector balance, or rather rebalance. The Member will be familiar, as a member of the Finance Committee, that the Executive have been focused in the last number of years on rebalancing our economy. It is good to see in the register that, over the year, there was a decrease in public-sector employment by 2·6% and a commensurate increase in private sector employment, also of 2·6%. The net increase was approximately 8,000 more jobs in the private sector rather than in the public sector; that is good news. It shows that the Executive's policy of rebalancing the economy is working.

It is in the news today, with the report on the voluntary exit scheme. The Member will know that I was involved in that. As Finance Minister, I helped to develop and implement that policy. It was new. It was novel. It was innovative. There are a lot of people in the House, and in the media, who want us to be bold and innovative, but then, when we are bold and innovative, they want to talk it down. This is a policy that worked.

I can remember sitting in TV studios and being asked, "What will you do when this does not work? What will you do when you don't get enough people coming forward?". Here we are now with an Audit Office report coming forward saying that this has been a success and it has worked. We will have to continue to be bold and brave in the public sector over the next number of years in government. I will certainly do that, and I know that my Executive colleagues will continue to be innovative in dealing with the many challenges that we face.

Employees: Private Companies

T3. **Mr Kearney** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the safeguards that are in place to protect the rights and conditions of workers who are employed by private companies such as Concentrix that attract multimillion pound contracts and grants from our job creation agencies to secure public-sector contracts. (AQT 318/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I am obviously aware of the particular issues that there have been with Concentrix. Concentrix has been successful in growing its company in Northern Ireland over the last number of years. It is putting down roots in Belfast through the redevelopment of the Maysfield site, and I want to encourage that company to continue to grow. It is facing particular issues, as the Member knows, around tax credits and payments. I have been in contact with the company and its head here in Northern Ireland. It has been following the instructions given to it by HMRC. It is the unfortunate victim, I believe, of the fallout of some political criticism of the contract. That does not take away from the impact that it has had on individuals. I certainly dealt with the impact in my constituency, and I am sure that the Member has dealt with the impact as well.

On the particular issues that the Member raised in respect of safeguards, I will take that away and will write back to the Member. I do not want to give him a half-hearted or indeed a wrong answer here now. I would rather give

him a comprehensive and full answer on the issues that he has raised.

Mr Kearney: I would appreciate that feedback, Minister, and thank you for that. As you know, it is a matter of very serious public interest. Staying in that vein, will you support the call from the Public and Commercial Services Union for an official inquiry into the established failings of the contract that you mentioned between HMRC and Concentrix?

Mr Hamilton: It is very much a matter for HMRC to decide what it wants to do. It is a stand-alone Department in terms of governance within the United Kingdom Government. It is doing various inquiries and inspections into the overall contract. I know Concentrix; I know the company. The Member's party colleague the Finance Minister attended the official launch of the new development down at Maysfield.

It is a company that has gone from strength to strength in Northern Ireland, and I want to see that continue. Obviously, it has borne the brunt of the issue that it had with the HMRC tax credit contract. I want to work with the company to see that it comes through that and continues to put down firm roots in Northern Ireland and grow its employment here.

Community Facilities

T4. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for the Economy what support he is providing to increase the provision of community facilities, given that he will be aware that community classes that are offered in church halls, Orange halls and community halls by our six local further and higher education colleges are a lifeline to many who live and work in isolated rural areas. (AQT 319/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I entirely agree with the Member about the very important role that community providers play in learning and skills development in our community. I saw that quite early on in my term when I visited the Shankill Women's Centre at the invitation of Diane Dodds and William Humphrey. I saw for myself the fantastic work that they are doing there. What struck me were the stories that I heard from participants in a wide range of courses. These were people who had not perhaps had the best experience in formal education, who felt that they were pushed outside of the system and who found it difficult to come back inside. It was a big step for them to go back into any form of education. One story in particular shone through for me. It was from a young lady who had a family of four but had gone back into

education. Having had very few qualifications, she had picked up more and was now applying to study midwifery at Queen's. It is that sort of community-based education story that we do not hear enough of, and, having seen it at first hand, it is an area that I want to support through the Department.

I am aware that colleges provide services in the various settings that the Member mentioned, and I want to see more of that happen. I do not think that enough of it happens. We have perhaps not been as supportive of community-based educators in recent times as we should have been.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answer. Given that, without those courses, many, as he said, would be unlikely to enrol on campus-based education courses, does the Minister appreciate the stepping-stone effect that community education can give to further study? What help is he providing colleges with to measure the impact of community courses and better target provision for rural areas?

Mr Hamilton: I will write to the Member specifically about the levels of support, impact and positive benefit that it has produced, and I am sure that it will be positive. I accept that it does not always show up that easily in a lot of the measurements that we use, but the real benefit is in exactly what the Member and I have been talking about: hard-to-reach people in hard-to-reach communities who are able to take the first step back into education, with confidence, in their own community setting and with their peers. Clearly, it is a first step. If they want to reach a certain level, particularly degree level, they cannot do all their education in a community setting, but it certainly breaks the ice for them to be able to do some of their early-stage qualifications there. I want to encourage more of that to happen and use all available funding measures at our disposal to ensure that there is more going on in a community setting than is currently the case.

NIE: East Londonderry Outages

T5. Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for the Economy to raise with NIE the case of a business in the East Londonderry constituency that is experiencing regular outages and has made very little progress with NIE to resolve the issue. (AQT 320/16-21)

Mr Hamilton: I appreciate that the Member may not want to go into detail in the House, but if he writes to me with details of the case, I will

be happy to take it up with NIE on his constituent's behalf. The Member asked me — a couple of weeks ago, I think — about BT and has raised the issue of NIE. He knows that they are both regulated industries so they are not directly accountable to me. They are not my responsibility. Even so, I hear a lot about them from Members such as him and in direct correspondence from businesses. I am currently hearing from landowners in different parts of Northern Ireland, particularly in County Tyrone, who are experiencing difficulties with NIE working, or wanting to work, on their land. When he had me in the west of the Province, in Omagh, Mr Buchanan took the opportunity to take me to some landowners who were experiencing some difficulties with NIE. It was not that they had objections to what was being done; it was the manner in which it was being done. I am meeting NIE this week, and I want to raise some cases that Mr Buchanan, and other Members, have raised with me. I am happy to raise the Member's issue as well, if he brings it to my attention in more detail.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: We have time for a quick supplementary and a quick response.

Mr McQuillan: Minister, can you update the House on your plans to ensure energy security for Northern Ireland in the future?

Mr Hamilton: I look at all the issues facing the economy in Northern Ireland, and there are many challenges facing Northern Ireland and our business community, but perhaps the biggest is energy, not just the price, particularly for higher users, but the security of supply. It affects our competitiveness, and it is particularly affecting our manufacturing businesses. I do not want to be alarmist and start talking about the lights going out, but I have concerns about future generation capacity in Northern Ireland.

We have to have a big, open, honest conversation about future energy policy in Northern Ireland, a conversation that has to touch on grid infrastructure, generation capacity, interconnection, storage and future renewables policy. In answer to the Member, who is behind me, all of that must be wrapped in an envelope of what we can do to make it as affordable as possible, particularly for big energy users in Northern Ireland. There are some potentially tough decisions within all of that, but we have to have that big, open, honest conversation about future energy policy, and I want to kick-start that in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. We now move to questions to the Minister of Education. Before I call Mr Harold McKee, I inform the House that question 14 has been withdrawn.

Education

Teachers and Ancillary Staff

1. **Mr McKee** asked the Minister of Education to outline what role his Department has in the employment of teachers and ancillary staff in schools. (AQO 446/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. The Department of Education is not the employer of teachers or ancillary staff in schools. The role of my Department in the employment of teachers relates to their terms and conditions, which are negotiated through the forum of the teachers' negotiating committee, at which my Department is represented. Teachers' terms and conditions, including pay, are negotiated through that committee. That applies to all teachers in grant-aided schools. My Department is responsible for approving the teacher appointment schemes of the Education Authority and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).

My Department has no role in the employment of ancillary staff. Arrangements for the terms and conditions of ancillary staff employed by the Education Authority (EA) are negotiated through the joint negotiating council. We have a smaller role on that council — my Department has observer status — than on the teaching side.

Arrangements for the terms and conditions of other ancillary staff are a matter for the individual boards of governors, and my Department has no role.

Mr McKee: Thank you, Minister, for your answer thus far. According to the DUP manifesto, the party is committed to ending the article 71 exemption for teaching in the Fair Employment and Treatment Order. What plan does the Minister have put this into action?

Mr Weir: Strictly speaking, that would lie outside my direct jurisdiction. I agree that article 71 needs to be removed. The legislation responsible for that does not lie within the Department of Education, it lies within the Executive Office. There is ongoing work to deal with that. It has previously been highlighted by, for instance, the Equality Commission. The

legislation to repeal that — to try to ensure that we have a level playing field in teacher employment — lies within the Executive Office rather than the Department of Education. However, it is important that we reach a situation in which we move on any artificial barriers to employment, particularly an exclusion that is, I think, a relic of the past.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Will he update the Chamber on what actions he has taken to address the lengthy precautionary suspensions of staff that are costing the Executive millions of pounds a year?

Mr Weir: It is important to note that, as the Department does not employ teachers directly, it is not directly involved in employment matters, including precautionary suspensions. Teachers are employed by the relevant boards of governors, and employment decisions, such as precautionary suspensions, are taken by individual boards of governors. We monitor all cases of precautionary suspension, paying due regard to the role of the employer. From February of this year, accounting officers in the employing authorities have been asked to provide the Department's chief accounting officer with governance and accountability reviews. That means that all such cases have been subject to monthly case review and that necessary action has been taken. It is an ongoing issue.

Decisions on precautionary suspension are not taken arbitrarily; they are taken by employers, which is the board of governors in consultation with the relevant employing authorities. Again, the Department is not the relevant employing authority, so we do not have a role or a power to intervene directly. We can try, where possible, to influence. Suspensions here tend to be a lot less frequent compared with other jurisdictions; there is greater security of tenure of positions. Ultimately, it is up to individual boards of governors and employing authorities. At best, we can try to be an influencer for progress and for good rather than having a direct intervention role.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. What is his Department doing to tackle long-term staff suspensions and their cost to school budgets?

Mr Weir: There is a potential cost to school budgets on that basis. We all have to ensure, particularly as schools are under a high level of pressure with the aggregated schools budget, that those are kept to a minimum. As I said, our

problem is that the terms and conditions lie outside the control of the Department, so we are trying to influence and send a positive signal to schools about the need to deal with precautionary suspensions, in particular, as swiftly as possible. When talking about precautionary suspensions, while due process always has to follow in those circumstances, it is in nobody's interest, whether it is the school, the budgetary position or the teacher who has received a precautionary suspension, for that to drag on any longer than is necessary. To be fair to schools, I do not think that they would take the significant step of precautionary suspension — there may be circumstances in which children need to be protected — very lightly. Most schools act in a very responsible manner. When there is a precautionary suspension, that decision is weighed very carefully before action is taken.

Mr Kearney: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. Will you give us an update on the Investing in the Teaching Workforce scheme, please?

Mr Weir: The scheme has received Executive approval. The previous Minister mooted something quite similar. The Executive have agreed that it will go forward on the basis of a pilot scheme for 2016-17, with about 120 eligible posts. There has been an indication from at least one person of a potential legal challenge. We will have to see whether that comes forward. There is a great opportunity. To be fair, it has been welcomed by the teaching workforce and, in particular, the trade unions as a positive way forward. The principal aim is to refresh the teaching workforce, but it will also benefit school budgets.

There is a longer-term issue with the profile of our teaching workforce and a concern as to whether the number coming through teacher training exceeds the number of posts available. That will need to be tackled in a wider context. Even if the Executive were in a position today to announce any change on that, you would be talking about people entering teacher training who would potentially graduate in a few years' time. It would be five to 10 years before you would see any benefit. I am acutely aware of the situation where we have a large number of recently qualified teachers who are not able to gain posts, and this is a potential win-win opportunity to enable some more newly qualified teachers to enter the profession while being able to release, on an entirely voluntary basis, some teachers who are between 55 and 59. That not only has to be applied for by that individual but has to be approved by the school, because some schools will take a view that they

do not want to let particular members of staff go.

Schools: ETI Ratings

2. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Education how many schools are rated by the Education and Training Inspectorate as either very good or outstanding. (AQO 447/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for the question. The Education and Training Inspectorate, which is more commonly referred to as the ETI, has a statutory function to monitor, inspect and report on the standard of education in schools on behalf of the Department of Education, to promote the highest standards of education in the interests of the pupils. Inspection ensures that best practice is highlighted and shared and poor provision is identified, supported and improved, and it contributes to building capacity for ongoing improvement.

The current inspection data shows that, over a seven-year period from 1 September 2009 to 31 August 2016, 504 schools, 428 of which were primary schools and 76 post-primary schools, have been rated by the Education and Training Inspectorate as either "Very good" or "Outstanding". I also note that, from 1 September 2015, ETI changed its "Overall effectiveness" reporting model from a six-point scale to a four-point scale, which, hopefully, will make it more accessible. The descriptors for overall effectiveness of "Very good" or "Outstanding" were amalgamated and became a new conclusion for overall effectiveness known as "High level of capacity for sustained improvement".

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his detailed response. I take the opportunity to congratulate a school in my constituency — Bocombra Primary School in Portadown — which recently received an "Outstanding" rating from the Education and Training Inspectorate. What is the Department's approach to raising standards in our schools?

Mr Weir: First, I join with all schools that have received good reports. As MLAs, we are glad that there is no training inspectorate for us to rate whether we are good, outstanding or otherwise. I am sure that all Members would fly through with flying colours in that regard.

The Department's school improvement policy, Every School a Good School, sets out an overarching approach to raising standards and tackling underachievement in all schools. It focuses on promoting factors that local and

international evidence tell us are the core characteristics of a school. It aims to support school leaders, boards of governors and teachers in implementing good practice in their school, to address any barriers to learning that pupils might face and to improve outcomes for all pupils. One of the things that we sometimes forget when the focus is very much on delivery in schools is that the ultimate goal of all this is to ensure that we get good results for all our pupils. They should be the ultimate focus.

Alongside the work of teachers, school leaders, boards of governors and the managing authority, inspection, I believe, is a critical component of school improvement. The Department's school improvement policy and inspection service are already closely aligned, with both being focused on promoting improvement in the interests of all learners. That alignment is not just something that is written in documents; its procedures have been introduced to follow up on all published inspection reports so that outstanding or very good practice can be shared, areas for further improvement identified and addressed and, where provision is less than satisfactory, additional support provided. Every School a Good School states that sustained improvement comes from within a school, and inspection is really a catalyst and enabler for improvement. There is a strong link between internal self-examination and external assessment undertaken through inspection so that, hopefully, an inspection becomes a continuum of improvement; it is not something that simply sits apart from the work that is ongoing in the school.

3.00 pm

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. Will you indicate how schools in the formal intervention process are being supported to achieve the standard expected by the inspectors and needed by our young people, when a large number of the support staff have exited the EA by the voluntary exit scheme?

Mr Weir: In terms of the support available, and mention has been made of the EA and the voluntary exit scheme, at the end of the day, we have to have a financial regime that is as beneficial as possible to all schools. In many ways, if the choice is between making some level of cuts within the EA or ensuring that money goes to the front-line services, I think that is what has to happen.

I think all schools should be receiving support, but there is, obviously, a limited level of resources. However, the focus has always been on providing post-inspection support to schools that are eligible for it through the formal intervention process. In the formal intervention process, we try to focus in those finite resources. They are prioritised to where the need is greatest and the capacity for self-improvement needs support. I think it is about having a working exercise between the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and the individual school to raise those standards and address the individual problems. To slightly adjust a previous line, you can say that:

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Where there are any problems in schools, they can sometimes be for a myriad of reasons. Different problems may need to be addressed, so it is about addressing those individual problems.

We should always focus on the fact that, in formal intervention — I appreciate this from the school's point of view — a school will have a feeling that it is damaging to its reputation, so it is difficult on that basis. But the focus always should be about providing help to pupils. If help is needed, it needs to go in by formal intervention, but that is obviously very much a last step in self-improvement.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Barry McElduff.

Mr McElduff: Mr Anderson's question relates to how schools are rated by the inspectorate. My question is this: who rates the inspectorate? Who inspects the inspectorate — the ETI? Is there an argument to be made that the Education and Training Inspectorate could perhaps be independent?

Mr Speaker: That is three questions, Mr McElduff.

Mr Weir: With testing in schools, sometimes we are faced with multiple-choice questions, and you can give a range of answers. I appreciate that the Chair has given me a range of questions.

I think the ETI has held up to strong scrutiny. If we are simply to have bodies monitoring other bodies that are monitoring others, there is a danger of having the situation you sometimes see in films of gazing into a mirror in the funfair, with images stretching into infinity. A report

was brought out — I am not claiming credit for it; it was largely before my time or the Chair's — that had recommendations on one of the areas on which the ETI is held to account by the Education Committee. In the last mandate, the Education Committee brought out a report on inspection and training with a large focus particularly on the ETI. It brought into place 16 recommendations, I think, of which 11 were directly for the ETI itself. I understand that all 11 recommendations have been implemented. I could list the 11 key changes, but shortage of time would preclude such an answer. The other recommendations fall to the Department, and I think they are being implemented as well. There is a key role for the Department and, in particular, the Committee, on this. Given the educational and financial constraints, I do not believe it would be particularly good value for public money to be setting up an additional body to scrutinise those who are scrutinising the schools, because we might be moving into a situation of observation ad infinitum.

Entitlement Framework

3. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future of the entitlement framework. (AQO 448/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. The entitlement framework remains an important component of the statutory curriculum. It is designed to ensure that all learners in Key Stage 4 and post-16 have access to a broad and balanced range of economically relevant and individually engaging courses. The majority of schools are meeting, or are very close to meeting, the entitlement framework requirements in full. That is a significant achievement in challenging times, and I am anxious that we retain and build upon the benefits that have been accrued so far. I will be considering the way forward for the entitlement framework over the coming weeks, including the statutory requirements.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he be more specific on the current rate of compliance with the entitlement framework?

Mr Weir: OK. Currently, to give perspective to this, schools are required to offer at least 24 courses at Key Stage 4, and 27 in the post-16 category. In addition, at least one third of the courses offered must be general and one third applied; that is the minimum figure. The most recent figures available are that 66% of schools fully meet the requirements at Key Stage 4 and 48% do so at post-16. Full compliance requires schools with post-16 provision to be compliant

at both phases. Using that measurement, 40% of schools were compliant in 2015-16. On the numerology of the schools that are not compliant, 59 fell short on total course numbers, and 51 of those fell short by a smallish amount of four courses or fewer — ie they offered between, for instance, 20 and 23 courses. So, there is not full compliance.

To be fair to the schools, they are operating under a very tough financial and budgetary regime. It seems to me that one of the potential ways forward on this, without prejudging any examination of it, is greater collaboration between schools. That is already beginning to happen, particularly with the shared education agenda. If we are talking about the delivery of courses, the key aim is to try to ensure that the maximum opportunity is there for pupils. That will not always be the case when we are talking about subjects that attract a relatively small number of pupils. However, cross-work between schools is vital for the way forward to ensure that maximum opportunities are provided to all our children.

Mr Smith: While the Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the development of economically relevant courses, does the Minister not agree that we need a fit-for-purpose curriculum that allows for more flexibility in its implementation?

Mr Weir: I do not disagree with the Member. We are in a situation where, even if we believed that everything in the curriculum was perfect at present, and I think that there is some criticism that we are not at that stage, it has been, I think, 10 years since there was a wider curriculum review. So, it is certainly my intention, during the lifetime of this Assembly, to do a review of the curriculum. There is a wide range of aspects to that, and while some aspects will be particularly relevant to primary schools, the focus will, obviously, be principally on post-primary provision.

Within that, there is the issue that we do have a great deal of success with our academic courses in Northern Ireland, and we have consistently led the rest of the United Kingdom in terms of our success rate. There may be a question, therefore, about the extent to which we value vocational courses to ensure that all our children are prepared for life outside the classroom on that basis. When some Members have raised that — I appreciate that the Member is not guilty of this — it has almost been put as an either/or, in that you must reduce the quality of academic courses to bring up the quality of vocational courses. It is important that we ensure that we protect our academic standards and, at the same time, give

that greater degree of strength to vocational subjects. I think that that will be a key component as we look ahead to a wider curriculum review. Economically — the Member, I think, raised this issue — that will be a key role, when we come to the review, not just for the schools or the Department but for all stakeholders, including, for instance, the Department for the Economy and the role that can be played in the cross-fertilisation with further education colleges and, in particular, business organisations, which I have already had some level of engagement with as we move forward. I think that it is important that developments on the skills barometer and the opportunities there are fed into the curriculum to provide different pathways for our children.

Ms J McCann: Does the Minister agree with me that the entitlement framework as it is currently defined gives pupils quite a lot of options and choices? Will he remain committed to the entitlement framework to provide equality of opportunity for all our children and young people?

Mr Weir: I want to ensure that we get the maximum amount of opportunities for all our children. As I indicated, some good work has been done in this field, particularly around the entitlement framework, and it is about trying to build on that success. This is where it is important to share within and between sectors. I am aware of a number of schools, particularly with the money that has been available from shared education, that have focused some of their projects on ensuring that that takes place. For example, I was at the launch of a shared project in Bangor involving three post-primary schools in the north Down area. Some of that project concentrates on where there are minority subjects, ensuring that they open up and that access to courses is fully available to all students.

If you have a situation where, from a school's point of view, for example, there are only six or seven pupils who want to take a particular A-level course, with tight budgets, there is a danger that some schools will say that that is not economical for them. However, if they can work with other nearby schools to provide a class that creates an economy of scale, that can be helpful to the school economically and from a sharing point of view because that will be very much on a cross-community basis. It will be a situation that keeps open and opens up additional possibilities for opportunities for children. It is important that we recognise where there has been success and try to build on it rather than looking at this in a negative fashion.

Dr Farry: Building on the Minister's last but one answer, what plans does he have to work with his colleague the Minister for the Economy on the creation of a formal 14-19 strategy for Northern Ireland? As part of that, what steps can he take to ensure that there is a proper division of labour between schools and FE colleges to avoid the situation that we have seen recently where schools are trying to replicate some of the vocational areas in which FE colleges have a comparative advantage and where they have a financial incentive to hang onto students when it is in their interest to go somewhere else for their education?

Mr Weir: The Member raises a very pertinent point, which is that we should be seeing as much complementarity in our system as possible, particularly in the interface between further education colleges and schools when it comes to sixth-form provision. We should not have a situation where there is replication and overlap. I have already met some representatives from the further education side of things. I stand to be corrected, but I suspect that the Economy Minister may be with me next week when I visit the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) to meet its chief executive. I know that the Member is very familiar with SERC.

In education, it is about looking a little bit beyond silo solutions to see where we can produce a joined-up approach. That is why I said that when we come to the issue of curriculum review, we should have a situation where all the key stakeholders are involved, beyond simply the narrow confines of what had been the view in education and the schools sector, shall we say. Important though they are, it should not simply be confined to that. There is a key economic driver within that, and there is a key role for the Department for the Economy, the further education colleges and other outside bodies as well.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Miss Michelle McIlveen — I am sorry — Ms Michelle Gildernew, I remind Members that question 4 is a constituency-specific question.

St Malachy's Primary School, Glencull

4. **Ms Gildernew** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's capital development plans for St Malachy's Primary School, Glencull. (AQO 449/16-21)

Ms Gildernew: Ceist uimhir a ceathair le do thoil.

Mr Weir: I suspect that the Member opposite's Irish may be a little bit better than that of the other Member who was mentioned in the introduction there.

There are currently no major capital projects planned for St Malachy's Primary School, Glencull. Given the substantial major capital investment programme that is under way, a further call for major capital projects is not anticipated in the near future. However, I am considering the merits of making a call in the relatively near future for new projects to be advanced in planning under the school enhancement programme (SEP). As the Member will be aware, the programme involves projects to refurbish or potentially extend current school buildings with a level of spend of between £500,000 and a maximum of £4 million. Therefore, while it will be particularly relevant to primary schools — the previous SEP call that was made earlier this year was ring-fenced purely to primary schools — it is not my intention to do that in the next call. SEPs are of particular advantage to primary schools.

A minor capital works application for the school to provide a new multipurpose hall and classroom is under review, and a scoping report has been undertaken by the Education Authority, identifying costs of around £500,000 for the scheme. That is being considered by the Department.

3.15 pm

Owing to the reactive nature and the volume of minor works, it is not possible to indicate future plans for further works at the school. At present, only minor works schemes that meet inescapable statutory requirements, such as health and safety, fire protection and statutory obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act, are progressing to delivery. For a lot of minor works and under the SEP, there is a vast estate out there that I would like to be able to help, but it is ultimately a question of prioritising and trying to ensure that we get the maximum out of the system.

Ms Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answer. As he said, there is an application in for a multipurpose hall that has a specific health and safety requirement. Do health and safety requirements attract a high priority when his Department determines such spending projects?

Mr Weir: They do. The scoping report has been undertaken by the Education Authority, and, from that point of view, health and safety is

one of the key aspects that we look at with minor works. Again, because of the current financial position, the problem is that, although capital budgets are a little bit looser than the resource side in the Department of Education, the amount that can be done is limited. I therefore cannot give a direct commitment, given the sheer volume of minor works. However, obviously, health and safety tends to be given the highest priority and will be critical in the consideration of any minor works for this or any other school.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Rossmar School: New Build

T1. **Mr Mullan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Rossmar special needs school and to state whether building is likely to start on the date proposed initially. (AQT 326/16-21)

Mr Weir: I do not have the detail on that particular new build to hand. We always hope to ensure that any new build occurs as swiftly as possible. We try to ensure that the capital flow happens and that we hit targets. I will get back to the Member on the specifics of the case. It is pertinent because, although all sectors are important when it comes to providing the right facilities, there is a particular onus on us when we are looking at special needs schools. I have had the opportunity to visit a number of schools that are in progress or have been completed for pupils with special needs.

Some of the provision is remarkable. I appreciate that this is outside the Member's constituency, but as part of the Strule campus, Arvalee, which was the first one built and was effectively fast-tracked on that basis, is a school specifically for special needs pupils in the broader Omagh area. Some of the provision there is remarkably good. However, I will get back to the Member with details on the individual school that he mentioned.

Mr Mullan: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. Considering the fact that a huge number of people have expressed concerns about the very limited provision during the summer and other holiday periods, can you give me a guarantee that you will consider extending extracurricular activities at the school to ensure that the children get the additional support that they need?

Mr Weir: I will certainly look at any proposals that are brought forward. One of the things that is useful in any new school build is that there is a much greater awareness nowadays of the need for provision outside the normal school hours, not simply for the children who use the school but for the wider community. I am talking in general terms, but I can look at the specific case that the Member has raised.

Going back a number of years — maybe 40 or 50 years — there was a tendency for schools, I am tempted to say, to discourage communities from using them. Barriers were put up. One thing that struck me about the new builds that I have been around and those that I have seen in progress is that the thinking is very much about how to make the school accessible beyond simply the classroom hours. I hope that that is something that can be borne in mind.

As I said, the specifics of the use of the school, particularly during the summer period, can be looked at. I am sure that, if there is a specific proposal, it can be considered. It may well be that the arrangements for such use will depend on what the board of governors in the school and possibly the Education Authority say.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Tandragee Primary School: Traffic Congestion

T3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education for an update on an important issue that has been raised with the Education Authority (EA) around traffic congestion at Tandragee Primary School and the impact that it is having on residents in the vicinity of the school and to outline any measures that the EA is pursuing to alleviate the problem. (AQT 328/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Member has been very proactive on the issue, and I welcome his involvement. From a practical point of view, it is not an issue that directly involves the Department, but we will monitor the situation to ensure that there is delivery.

The Education Authority has informed me that, following discussions with the school's board of governors and Transport NI, a revised planning application was submitted on 27 September. One can never prejudge a planning application, but, if it is accepted, the new, revised scheme, once implemented, will ensure that adequate traffic management systems are in place and, hopefully, that congestion around Tandragee is alleviated.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Is there a time frame for that?

Mr Weir: There appears to be a suggestion that no particular concerns have been raised about the planning application. As with any of these things, an attempt was made to ensure that what was put forward was broadly acceptable before it reached that point. The direct involvement is with the Education Authority, and it has informed me that, subject to its internal processes to make funding available and subject to planning permission being granted, it intends to have the works completed by the end of March 2017. We are talking about it being five months away, by the end of this financial year. It will certainly be in place for the next school year.

Buddy Bear Trust

T4. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Education whether he agrees that it is a most unusual situation that while his Department, under article 26 of the Education Order 1996, recognises the Buddy Bear Trust, the Education Authority does not seem too keen to send pupils to it, in that it states that the evidence to support that type of education is inconclusive. (AQT 329/16-21)

Mr Weir: I am aware of the good work being done by Buddy Bear and have met Brendan McConville on a number of occasions. The issue will be the placement of individual children and what is best for their needs. At times, some Education Authority officers have taken a view on where the best placement was. It is about trying to ensure a mix of children in order to be able to provide the best quality for an individual child.

In that sense, Buddy Bear is not a formal school in the system, but there is provision, where there has been an educational placement — as has happened at Buddy Bear and other schools that lie outside the formal education process — for funding to follow the event, which is right and proper. We have to ensure that we get the best possible setting for every child. The Department cannot micromanage that, because placements for children with special needs lie directly with the Education Authority. There will also be a pertinent view from the Health Department and health workers, in particular, on the best way forward for conductive education. It is about trying to get a mix of views to face in the right direction.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for that answer. Would he agree to officials from his

Department meeting their counterparts in the EA and representatives of the school, if only to try to sort out that confusion and allow everybody to know where they stand?

Mr Weir: It can be made very clear that the power lies with the EA. Interestingly, there are opportunities for Buddy Bear, and a bit of thought needs to be given to this. The Education and Training Inspectorate produced a report on Buddy Bear in 2013. It recommended — no pun intended — a sort of buddy arrangement with Sperrinview Special School to look at structures to establish informal links. While it was not taken up at the time, that is a good opportunity. While Buddy Bear is independent of the system, building stronger links between its provision and what is already in the system will be helpful. I have spoken to my officials to see whether that can be explored. Ultimately, that will require choice for the schools to ensure that we give the maximum help to these very special kids.

Children and Young People's Strategy

T5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Education to explain how his Department is bringing forward the children and young people's strategy through consultation and engagement with relevant stakeholders. (AQT 330/16-21)

Mr Weir: We will be working on the strategy for children and young people. As part of the strategy, we will seek to outline how the Executive will work cooperatively. I am aware of the Children's Services Co-operation Act, and, as regards timescale, the intention is to lay the strategy before the Assembly for scrutiny in the second week of December. I hope that these things will move reasonably quickly. It is important that the strategy aligns with the Programme for Government. Obviously, we are waiting for the final draft of the Programme for Government to ensure that it is aligned. There is a concern that that might lead to a slight delay, but, if it is not possible to meet the December deadline, we will look for the final strategy to be laid in the Assembly early in the new year. It is important that any of the strategies that emerge from the Departments align with the overall global position of the Programme for Government.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I have just come from a meeting with Conradh na Gaeilge. It welcomes the fact that children from Irish-medium education have been consulted by the

Department. Will the Minister ensure that his Department continues to consult and engage with children from Irish-medium education so that they can gain an understanding of the expectations for the future in terms of accessing goods and services and dealing with Departments and public bodies through the Irish language?

Mr Weir: It is important that consultation takes place in a wide range of sectors and with children from a wide range of backgrounds. Obviously, as was mentioned, we cannot have the absolutely final position until the strategy is laid. However, while there has not been formal consultation, an informal co-design of the strategy has already taken place between the Department and a wide range of stakeholders. That directly includes children and young people from all backgrounds. It is important that all backgrounds are part of that. We sometimes get hung up on the processes of direct formal consultation — they are important — but, if we can use informal consultation to inform the final strategy, that will hopefully ensure that the final strategy is very much fit for purpose. I assure you that consultation with the widest range of stakeholders and individuals, particularly children and young people from every conceivable background, will continue.

Nursery Education: East Belfast

T6. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Education what support his Department has given to nursery provision in East Belfast. (AQT 331/16-21)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education funds the preschool education programme, which aims to ensure that at least one year of preschool education is available to every family that wants it. That provides one year of non-compulsory education and builds on learning and experience. Some 99.9% of target-age children of parents who engaged fully with this year's admissions process were offered a funded place.

It is also the case that, following the publication of Learning to Learn, the Department introduced a new procedure to have a greater level of flexibility for a classroom. The level of provision available in the East Belfast constituency also increased recently when a development proposal for additional preschool places at Dundonald Primary School was approved. From September 2016, the number of part-time preschool places at that setting has doubled from 26 to 52.

3.30 pm

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answer thus far. Have any of the nursery units in East Belfast been successful in obtaining temporary flexibility in nursery places?

Mr Weir: There has now been provision in nursery units. Up until a couple of years ago, a very rigid approach was taken to the numbers, and that did not necessarily accommodate the opportunities and pressures that were there. That was changed a couple of years ago, and two nursery units in East Belfast — Knocknagoney Primary School and Dundonald Primary School — have used that process to request temporary flexibility. That led to additional places being approved in each of those settings, although a further place in Knocknagoney was not approved as it was not considered necessary to meet the needs of the area.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. That ends the period for questions to the Minister of Education. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Healthier Lifestyles for Children

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly encourages schoolchildren to live a healthier lifestyle; acknowledges that following the introduction of a levy on drinks with a high sugar content, an estimated £18 million will be allocated from the Treasury to the Executive's Budget in 2018; and calls on the Minister of Finance to ring-fence this money to fund an educational awareness and physical education programme in schools to benefit the long-term health of our children and to ease pressure on the health service. — [Ms Lockhart.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out from "2018;" and insert

"notes with concern that only approximately 6% of pupils in each primary year are accessing two or more hours' physical education per week; calls on the Minister of Finance to ring-fence this money to fund an educational awareness and physical education programme

in schools to benefit the long-term health of our children and to ease pressure on the health service; and further calls on the Minister of Education to improve the monitoring and reporting of physical education hours per week accessed by primary pupils and to issue a public consultation on the introduction of a statutory obligation on schools to facilitate an appropriate minimum amount of physical education hours per week for primary-school pupils." — [Mr Lyttle.]

Mr Smith: Eighty per cent of children who are obese between the ages of 10 and 14 will become obese adults, with all the resulting societal impacts. Twenty-five per cent of children in Northern Ireland are classified as overweight or obese, with 21% of girls and 15% of boys overweight and 7% of both genders obese. According to the health survey in Northern Ireland in 2014, there has been no change in these figures since 2005. The Department of Health's 'A Fitter Future for All' has set targets for reducing childhood obesity by 3%, with a 2% reduction in overweight children and obesity by 2022. While there has been marginal improvement in recent years, a target of having 25% of our children overweight or obese is unacceptable. The number of children classed as obese or overweight is also related to deprivation. The Northern Ireland social care inequalities monitoring system showed that the number of P1 children classified as obese rose from 3.1% for boys and 4.5% for girls in the least deprived areas to 5% for boys and 6.3% for girls in the most deprived areas.

Diet obviously plays a key role, and the national diet and nutrition survey showed that 96% of 11- to 18-year-olds in Northern Ireland did not meet the five-a-day recommendation for fruit and vegetable consumption. The other key element, of course, is exercise. Northern Ireland schools, as has been said, have a target of providing at least two hours of PE per week, yet the NHS recommends at least 60 minutes of moderate exercise each day for children and young people between the ages of five and 18. Less than a quarter of five- to 12-year-olds in Northern Ireland achieve that target. We all know that poor diet and a lack of exercise amongst children builds up future health problems for the child and, in turn, wider society. We also know that Northern Ireland is especially struggling to improve its performance in these areas.

It is welcome that we have the opportunity to invest £18 million in awareness and physical education programmes, and I support the motion, in as far as it goes. It is good to see

that the DUP sees the value of hypothecation now that it has given control of finance over to Sinn Féin but, frankly, this £18 million is a drop in the ocean. Public health awareness is very much the poor relation, and we fail to invest significant funding in prevention programmes. To provide proper context, let me indulge in a few sums. There are 1,180 schools in Northern Ireland serving just over 328,000 pupils. That large figure of £18 million becomes just £15,254 per school. In fact, it would probably fund a third of a PE teacher. That is good, and I welcome the opportunity it brings, but I just seek to put it all in context.

What we need, as ever in Northern Ireland, is to be more radical, set more challenging targets and move that bar higher and quicker. This is about the future of our children, our health service and our public finances. Eighteen million pounds is certainly a start, but we need to commit to at least one hour's exercise per day for each child, drastically improve our diets, particularly in our most deprived areas, and at last halve the number of obese and overweight children by 2022. I call on the Health and Education Ministers to use this funding as a stimulus to develop a strategy that will transform our performance on those issues. This is too important to be left to what is essentially a budget that will, by design, reduce as the consumption of sugary drinks falls. I support the amended motion but as a first step rather than a destination.

Mr McGrath: I support the motion. We can invest in our manufacturing industry, our economy, our infrastructure and our communities, but, fundamentally, if we do not invest in our children, we have something wrong with our priorities, and our finances are simply papering over the cracks.

Our children face many obstacles to a healthy lifestyle that we did not. They have access to sweets, sugary drinks, energy drinks laced with caffeine, and crisps. You name it: what was once for us the preserve of a treat bought once a week with pocket money is now available to children on tap. You can couple that with the fact that the lifestyle is promoted by IT, smartphones, gaming and social media. When we wanted to know something, we had to go out there and find it out, and we had to go into the community to kick a football. Now, children, with just a click of a finger or a roll of the thumb, can get the information they need. We have increased calorie intake on one side and reduced movement and exercise on the other. That imbalance is certainly going to lead to problems in the future.

What I like about the motion is that it is not about punishing the child or overt legislation to manage the issue. It is simply saying that a small levy will be applied to those companies and that we will take that money and put it into schools to see whether we can encourage young people to become involved in education and fitness programmes to help their health. We are not saying in the motion that we want to reduce intake or prevent kids from having sweeties; it is just about the levy being used and the finances that are there to help motivate children to move and get exercise. I would ask, as ever, and I will continue to do so, that consideration is given to how some of that money might be used within youth service. They have access to over 150,000 young people each year and are ideally placed to work with some young people schools cannot reach. Some of those who do not engage in school or in PE at school are happy to engage in activities within youth services that could help them.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Ireland has written to express its support for the motion and to encourage the Northern Ireland Executive to actively combat the problem of childhood obesity in the North. With 25% of children in Northern Ireland being classified as overweight or obese, early intervention is crucial if we are to prevent the causes of serious illness. With one in five children in the UK starting school overweight or obese, and with that increasing to one in three by the age of 11, we need to address health problems and do all we can to ensure that children are active and as active as they can be.

What is shocking is the number of children living in poverty in Northern Ireland. Nearly one quarter of all children in Northern Ireland are living in poverty and in households that cannot afford what is defined as an ordinary living pattern. With a recent study revealing the stark reality of the cost of healthy eating, it is clear that children from low-income families are the ones who will be hit the most.

The study reveals that a healthy food basket for a two-parent, two-children household costs £115, while a one-parent, two-children family needs to spend £99 to eat healthily each week. That equates to nearly half their weekly income, and it is easier for them to fill up on cheaper junk food than it is to have a healthy lifestyle. We are literally killing our children in the long run.

I support the motion and any other initiative that helps to give children and young people the

best start in life, the best preparation for their future and, above all, access to a healthy lifestyle.

Mr Agnew: When Carla Lockhart opened the debate, she talked about not wanting to waste money and not wanting to waste an opportunity. Undoubtedly, putting £18 million into children's physical education would not be a waste of money, but my fear is that it would be a waste of a much bigger opportunity.

I have worked on children's issues a lot since I have been in the Assembly, and one thing has come up time and time again: if you want to make a real difference, invest in early years. That is something that we have singularly failed to do; certainly, previous Executives have failed to do it. In their defence, it is difficult to take resources away from other aspects, such as youth services, which Mr McGrath mentioned, schools or whatever it might be and say to them, "Well, all the evidence shows that we will get a better return in the early years". However, what we are talking about here is £18 million of new money that we do not have to take from anywhere else. That is why I sought to table an amendment calling for the investment to be put into early years provision, before a child even enters school.

There is a challenge for us. All too often we see children almost as if they existed solely in schools and all their ills can be addressed through the school system. Children exist before school, and they exist before and after school even when they are of school age. We have to look at how better to support children and families in those circumstances; otherwise we risk treating the symptoms and not the cause. We need to change and to support the families and the communities in which the children live if we are to make a real difference. The evidence is there. The work of Professor Heckman has been referenced in a number of debates in the Assembly. He has shown that £1 invested in early years can save £9 in later life by tackling social disadvantage, educational underachievement and everything that comes with that. One programme in Bournemouth that invested in under-twos helped to tackle obesity further down the line. It also helped to improve language ability and educational outcomes. Undoubtedly, if we put £18 million into physical education it will have benefit, but I believe that we can have much more benefit by investing earlier and, in my view, more wisely.

Look at the provision of Sure Start in Northern Ireland. That early years service is woefully underfunded. The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) estimates that it

would cost £37 million to make that a universal service, as it was before the Tories got hold of it in England. I think of my situation as a parent and the support that we get as a family from our health service. I do not want to be critical, because I know that things are stretched. It came to my daughter's review on whether she was able to move on from the health visitor provision. I was about to catch a train when I got an unexpected phone call. I was told, "I am your daughter's health visitor. I am just calling to see if everything's fine". This was as I was about to buy my train ticket. "Yes," I said, "she has had a bit of a cold, but things are fine". "That's OK," came the reply, "I am just looking to sign her off my books". I have no criticism of the health visitor — I suspect that she had quite a lengthy caseload, and my family had flagged no problems — but, as a parent, I would much rather have had properly resourced services that meant that I could have had an interview with the health visitor to discuss all aspects of my daughter's development. I have sympathy with those who have reservations about ring-fencing the money —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Would the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Agnew: I believe that there are better ways in which we can invest to get a better return for children.

3.45 pm

Mr E McCann: I listened to the debate this morning and when it resumed this afternoon. I have to say that I found little in it to object to. I agreed with practically everything that was said by every Member who contributed to the debate. I would say that that has not been an unvarying experience of my time in the House. It was very welcome.

I approve when people say that it is a disgrace that we lag far behind Scotland, for example, when it comes to timetabled and actual time spent in schools on physical exercise and sport. That is a disgrace. I agree with everybody who said that, and something should be done about it and all the other things that have been said. But it seems to me that, when almost everybody can agree with almost everything that has been said, you have to wonder whether there are any sharp-edged points to be made in the debate at all. An awful lot of it seemed to me to be motherhood and sugar-free apple pie. That is absolutely fine except that it does not contribute much to deepening our understanding of these matters.

It seems to me that we have to look for the key variable at a statistical level that helps us to understand where childhood obesity comes from. What is it? Is it the colour of our eyes or hair? Is it the religious community that we come from? Is it the colour of our skin? No, it is none of those things. By far the most decisive aspect or factor is poverty. It is overwhelmingly more important than anything else that has been mentioned today. Every survey shows it. A Fabian Society survey published just last year shows that, in our society, the poorer a family is, the more likely it is that the children will suffer from obesity and a great number of other things. That is true over a range of problems that we have in society: sickness at all ages, cardiac problems, respiratory problems or educational attainment. Take any of those matters, which are frequently debated simply on their own terms in the context of that particular issue, and look at it deeply — not all that deeply do you have to look — and you will discover that income is the most important thing. Do you want to predict the chances of people going to university and so forth? Again, the simple fact is that it is the disposable income of the family that you are born into that is overwhelmingly more important than anything else.

Ms Lockhart: Thank you for giving way. I agree to a degree about poverty and the links with obesity, but I have to say that I represent a constituency that has both poverty and affluence, and I can assure you that there are the same health issues in the affluent areas as there are in the areas of poverty.

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

Mr E McCann: I take the Member's word for it that that is the experience in her constituency. I will point out two things to her. Statistics can be misleading at times when you consider them at constituency level or even at local government ward level. You can have constituencies where very wealthy people live — that is absolutely fine, and I have no objection — and very poor people live. Depending on the proportion of one and the other, you will find that the same area can be defined as doing better than average economically and doing less well depending on the way in which you look at it. Every survey that measures differences in income between families shows that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Could the Member be careful with the mic?

Mr E McCann: Sorry?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The microphone, Mr McCann —

Mr E McCann: Am I hitting it? Sorry about that.

Everything shows that. There are a couple of specific reasons for it. One authoritative survey shows that, when we are dealing with high-value, healthy foods, the price per calorie can be three times as high as that of junk food and foods that cost very little.

Therefore, if you are poor, there is an economic incentive. You are pushed towards buying food that fills your children's stomach and stops them from feeling hungry but that is at their expense, as it is very unhealthy food. That is one of the factors, and there are many others.

All the evidence suggests that I am right about that, and not because I understand these things better than anybody else. Look at the statistics and the surveys, and you will see that I am right in general terms about poverty being the main predictor of obesity in children. If I am right about that, and if we want to deal with the problem, we have to look at joblessness, low pay and cuts in benefits. All those things that plunge families deeper into poverty are directly relevant to the question.

I will illustrate one other truth, and it is this: the main divide in our society on this issue, as on so much else, is not between one community and another but between the rich and the poor. We are characterised by class differences not community differences. To that extent, we are not particularly representative here of the community as a whole. It is meaningless to talk about the subject without factoring in the income difference and class difference —

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

Mr E McCann: — between different families.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Iarraim ar an Aire Airgeadais chun freagairt.

Mr Ó Muilleoir (The Minister of Finance): Tá an-áthas orm bheith anseo leat inniu, go háirithe agus Conradh na Gaeilge ag stocaireacht ar an taobh eile den bhóthar.

There is much that is laudable and admirable about the motion brought forward by Ms Lockhart and the amendment brought forward by Mr Lyttle. In fact, some might say it is a very sweet deal for the Education Department. However, as we heard from other Members, it

would be a bitter blow to the Department for Communities, to the Department for the Economy, which deals with jobs, to our friends in the Health Department and even to our friends in the Department for Infrastructure who deal with cycling if we were to accept the motion or the amendment, as we would be accepting that the money that will come by and by from this sugar tax will go only to Education.

I listened to all the Members, finishing with Mr McCann, and everyone accepts that the problem that we face around obesity, ill health, the excessive use and intake of sugar and sugar-fuelled drinks and foods is multifaceted and that we should have a holistic response to it. If I were to accept that, I would be able to ring-fence money, which would be a great power to have, although I do not actually have that power. However, if we were to accept that we should ring-fence money for Education only, we would be saying that we do not believe that there is a role for some of the great work that Mr Givan in the Department for Communities is doing on sport promotion and the park runs on a Saturday morning. We would be saying that there is no role here for an intervention by the Health Department for adults through the women's and community groups that we have in places such as the Village or the Shankill Road, where people are making real efforts to combat ill health and obesity. The Department for Infrastructure is making progress with the cycling revolution that Mr Kennedy, who is not with us in the Chamber, ushered in and that is continuing with events such as Ciclovía and other efforts to get people on their bike.

For that reason, to have the money go to Education only is to have a silo mentality. I am not suggesting for a minute that, because the DUP holds the Education portfolio, the proposer was suggesting that we should ring-fence the money for Education only. My colleague John O'Dowd, who fully opposed the motion, said that, even if he were still the Education Minister, he would have opposed it. I leave Members to make up their own mind on that matter.

Certainly, the days of the silo mentality are gone. We are committed to a Programme for Government — all the parties. No doubt we will have a good discussion around the final draft, but we are all committed to having an outcomes-based government and strategy. That means that we will cross-cut against many Departments, so the day for saying that one Department alone can resolve societal issues is gone.

For those reasons, I am obliged to oppose —

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I very much welcome his assertion that the days of the silo mentality have gone. This predates the Minister's time in the Executive, but I recall the Department of Education's budget having to be ring-fenced last year, or perhaps the year before, in order for Sinn Féin to support the Budget. It would do so only with that proviso.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I welcome Mr Durkan's intervention. It is a matter for the Executive, as you should know as a former member, to agree to ring-fencing. I want that power. If anyone here wants to give me the power to ring-fence money on my own, I will accept readily in the morning, but it is a matter for the Executive. I do not think that this Executive, united in common purpose, will agree, when we face massive issues such as obesity, that only one Department should get the money to deal with that.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for giving way. Notwithstanding what he said about the need for a multi-departmental response to childhood obesity, does he agree that physical education in schools is clearly a particularly acute problem, given that, on average, only 4% of primary-school pupils get the recommended amount of physical education? Does he agree that very strong investment and a strong message are needed in response to that?

I should thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber today. He seems to be breaking a tradition, but he is very welcome.

Mr Ó Muilleoir: I thank the Member for his intervention, which may be the last. If he listens to his own speech — I can quote it back — he will see that, as he went on, even he accepted that it is not through education alone that we should tackle this. Of course, it is a serious issue, and that is why we are here today.

The other key point is that heretofore we have accepted as an Assembly, and as an Executive, that the Barnett consequentials should not be dedicated to any area before they arrive. It is a tradition that the money comes back to the centre, and the Executive decide how it should be divvied up. I stand by that principle; I think that it is the correct way forward.

There is just one other thing, and this used to happen with my student grant. I always assumed that my grant was coming in and that it would be more than it was. It was always spent within a week, when I had planned three months of spending. We do not know whether

£18 million or £14 million will come from the sugar tax, so I suggest, Members, that we do not get too far ahead of ourselves. The sugar tax will come in, I think, in 2018, and I noticed Mr Noonan's announcement today that it will be the same year south of the border. It could be 2019 before revenues come in. Before you spend the entire £18 million, £14 million or £10 million, we should hold our budgetary horses. I agree with Mr McElduff that this is not the correct budgetary approach to the Barnett consequential.

I will refer to some of the points made by Members. Mr McCann made the point that I also make: this is not an issue that can be dealt with by education alone. He pointed out the crucial role of jobs and made a point that goes without contradiction: poverty and ill health are linked. Obesity is a plague on many different sectors of society, but there is no doubt that poverty and ill health are linked.

Mr Agnew — I do not know how he will vote — made the point that this is also about families, communities, preschool and children of above school age. The point is that the issue is much wider, and it would not be wise for us to limit ourselves to education when tackling it.

The SDLP health spokesperson, Mr Durkan, said that the key to reducing pressure on the health system lies elsewhere. That is, I think, a very strong point: we do not spend enough on prevention and do not have enough strategies. We are more likely to tackle the effects of unhealthy lifestyles than to intervene at an early stage. That also means that our approach must be broader than education.

John O'Dowd — *mo chomrádaí, mo chomhghleacaí; my comrade, my colleague* — talked about setting the social agenda through taxation. That is what is happening, although it is happening over our heads, and I would much rather that we introduced the sugar tax, decided how it would be implemented and, of course, how it should be spent. I agree with him that it is a matter for the Executive how the tax levy and dividend should be used in the time ahead. He made a strong point, repeated by many Members here, that there is not enough physical education in schools. However, as parents, grandparents and people involved in our communities, we should be going to schools that we think do not fulfil the curriculum obligation rather than addressing it here. I do not know how accurate the statistics that were quoted are, but I see evidence in many schools of very strong physical education elements in the curriculum.

4.00 pm

Mr Smith appealed to the Health Minister to focus on health interventions, and he viewed obesity as a health issue. I do not know whether he will vote no, but that seems to be wider than the motion or the amendment. As you say, it should be a first step — I agree with that — rather than a destination. You said that it was a sort of stimulus, and I will come back to that. Mr McGrath said that we should invest in our children, and we all agree with that. I see that investment in many areas. I presume that Mrs Dobson will vote no as well, because she said that it is not a stand-alone issue, and I agree with that. It is an effort across government, yet the motion and the amendment focus on just one area. I agree with her that, if we can work now with young people, it will add years to their lives and save the health service money later on. Mr McElduff did something that we do not do enough of: he pointed to the great work of the IFA and the GAA, with their 61 coaches, 571 schools and 39,000 pupils. We should not lose sight of the great work going on to tackle the problems and to rise to the challenges.

Mr Lyttle's amendment states that we should ring-fence money for education, and he said that it is a multifaceted problem. We finished off with Mr Lyttle's intervention, which contradicted what he said. It is a multifaceted problem, but the solution that I am being told to implement — if I had the power and the authority — is to focus on education only. I agree with him when he talks about a fitter future for all and partnership.

The last Member whom I will reference is Ms Lockhart, who talked about £18 million of new money. We will see what it is. If it is not money from America, it will, hopefully, be an addition to our Budget. I suggest — I am sympathetic to this, Ms Lockhart — that we should have an opportunity to discuss holistically how the money could be used to make an impact. Even if we accept that Barnett consequentials go to the centre, perhaps an initiative could be fuelled by the money — a stimulus, as Mr Smith says — to make a real step change in our effort to tackle obesity, especially obesity in children. We can return to that, and I will keep an open mind.

In other countries, a sugar tax has been used for different purposes. In some countries, it is used to help welfare programmes, and, in others, it is used to tackle health issues. I want us to craft how a sugar tax is used and not to ape or follow the lead of other jurisdictions. As an Assembly, as an Executive and as

Committees — four Committees are interested in this — we could bring forward good proposals and solutions for how the money might be used to tackle the issues that we talked about. At the core of that is wanting our people to live and enjoy healthier lives. As Mrs Dobson said, your health is your wealth.

I will oppose the motion and the amendment, but, at the same time, I am sympathetic to the overall thrust of the debate and hope that we can return to it. I hope that, when we do that, I will have money in the purse to help to deliver the outcomes that people wish to see.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank all Members who spoke today. For the first time in the Chamber, I will not read from a speech, because the debate has been so good, with so many important points being raised. I do not want to repeat them, but I want to knit them together a bit.

First, I come to the Ministers points around ring-fencing. The Minister will know, as a colleague in South Belfast, that I come from the community sector and worked in community health projects. It is rather naive to say that the schools would act in silos, because, when we look at the after-school programmes, the Active Communities coaches who went into the schools, the mums and young girls projects and the lads and dads projects they often emanated from the schools and were not necessarily within school time. Others in the Chamber today have referenced the after-school programmes, the youth clubs and the sports clubs, and there is great partnership between them. We support the motion, in terms of going into the schools, because it is a mandatory time that children are there. Not all children go to every sports club. Not every child goes to Sunday school or an after-school programme. We feel that, while the children are in a learning environment, that is where the money should go.

I reference Steven Agnew's comments about Sure Start. While I have experience of working with them, especially in South Belfast, not all children are eligible for that. For example, children from asylum-seeker families who live on the Lisburn Road, because of their postcode, are not eligible to go to their local Sure Start. Do not tell me —

Mr Agnew: I appreciate the Member giving way. Just for clarification, my point was about making Sure Start a universal service, as it should be, and using the money for that.

Ms Bradshaw: I appreciate the point, but my point is that not all children who are at the lowest ebb in terms of poverty actually access Sure Start, and that is to do with the structures through which that programme is run out. We feel schools are the best vehicle for that.

Going forward, in terms of the Programme for Government, most of the debate has come from the Sinn Féin corner around ring-fencing and whether it is the right way to go. Our amendment proposes a consultation process whereby we would inform. We would start with the stakeholders in the schools — the head teachers — and make our way down but also with the parents and the stakeholders in that community to look at a structured programme that children of all ages and backgrounds could access. That would provide a comprehensive response to inform how the money would be spent. My colleague Chris said today that Alliance is usually very reluctant to sign up to ring-fencing of any money of this kind because there are other good causes out there, but again we come back to the schools as the main vehicle for this.

The other point I would like to end on has been raised a few times. It really started with Carla's comments about the "bubbly children", which I thought was a lovely word to use for children. As we all know, they are so full of life, and we would call them "sponges", for example. This is really about supporting our children from the start of their educational career and investing in them as children but also investing in the long-term health and wealth of the nation as they grow into the future.

The other way we would invest the £18 million would be through teachers, volunteers in the school and leaving resources behind — educational resources but also footballs, goal nets and stuff like that. A lot of schools, as people will know, really struggle with their budget for things that are probably called "luxuries" but should really be essentials. There would also be investment in the wider community where there are collaborative projects.

When I was working in community health projects we used different venues to educate the young men, especially those in danger of educational underachievement. For example, we took them to Windsor Park to do maths lessons with footballs. This may be about education and physical activity, but again it is a wider education process that we would be asking people to engage in. Obviously, it is through health, food, healthy eating and lifestyles and stuff, but the lessons of taking

them outside their classroom for two hours a week and getting them active, while also getting their minds active, is something we really need to consider.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Paula Bradley to wind up on the motion. The Member has up to 10 minutes.

Ms P Bradley: I welcome the opportunity to wind up the debate today. I thank my colleague, Carla Lockhart, for asking me to countersign the motion. I also thank Chris Lyttle and Paula Bradshaw for the amendment, which we will also support.

I will say at the outset that it is clear from the debate today — this is certainly unanimous — that everyone in the Chamber wants to support some way of tackling obesity, especially the problem of childhood obesity, in Northern Ireland. I know we had ideas of varying degrees about how to choose to fund and do that that may differ slightly, but I think there is consensus in the Chamber that this needs to be tackled. We know that cardiovascular disease and cancer are still two of the largest killers in Northern Ireland. We also know that both are very much determined by obesity. The increased prevalence of type 2 diabetes is a problem too. We hear time and again about the number of people every year in Northern Ireland being diagnosed with that. Although not all the time, obesity can quite often be attributed to diabetes.

I, like others, believe that, to reduce it in years to come, we need to tackle not only obesity in children but lifestyles in general. This is where I might get myself into a little bit of trouble: I am of the generation that was encouraged to go outside and play and to be members of every club going. Of course, I arrived here at Stormont and put on not only the Stormont stone but possibly the Stormont two stone, so maybe —

Ms Lockhart: So did I.

Ms P Bradley: Yes, Carla; I can see that on you. *[Laughter.]* So maybe I need to declare a little bit of an interest. I was certainly of that generation. I grew up in a family that was not affluent in any way, shape or form — I grew up on a housing estate — but I had a mother who was a wonderful cook, and, even worse, she was a wonderful baker. I was used all my life to eating healthily and having healthy food. I see Mr Ford laughing; he knows my mother very well from his social work days. That is how I grew up and how we were. I believe that, as a

parent, I have shared that experience with my children; they know full well where their food comes from. They are quite used to having to go into my garden to pull up garlic, carrots or potatoes. That is how I was brought up, and that, in turn, is how I have brought my children up. There is a greater societal issue as well as one to do with physical activity and things like that.

I do not intend to repeat all the statistics that have been stated here today; they have been well versed. It is rather stark to see the lack of physical activity amongst our children and grandchildren. Turning to some of the comments, my colleague Ms Lockhart talked about a legacy for children and adults for the future. She said that the aim of the motion is to promote early intervention. I fully understand that and think we are not always best prepared in here for some of the motions and the actions we bring forward. Sometimes we need to plan a little earlier. She also mentioned that bad habits are hard to break and that so many of them begin in childhood. Many Members touched on that. She spoke about the project in Upper Bann called Healthy Kids. We had a similar project that ran in Rathcoole Primary School in my area. It brought children and parents together. The parents were taught how to cook healthy meals, and children were taught where the food came from. Parents and children sat down and ate food together. For some of those parents and children, that was not a regular occurrence. They talked about where the food came from and the preparation of it. I understand that all those initiatives, albeit they are not the be-all and end-all, will form part of a healthier lifestyle here in Northern Ireland. It was stark to hear that Northern Ireland is the least active part of the UK. When we look at all the sporting greats we have and the produce we develop here in Northern Ireland, we see that that is sometimes quite hard to believe.

Mr Lyttle said that this issue was one of the greatest challenges facing us. I have to agree with that. It is something that we see increasing year-on-year, and it is certainly something we need to address. He also talked about the vital importance of tackling the problem. That should be multifaceted. It came out time and again during the debate that this is not just an educational issue; it is a cross-departmental and multifaceted issue.

I thank Mr McElduff for his contribution. He agreed — as I said earlier, there is consensus — with the tone and sentiment of the motion, although he did not agree with how we should

fund or approach the issue. I understand and respect those issues as well.

4.15 pm

Mrs Dobson made quite a good point about skills and knowledge that will stay with our children into adulthood. That is my experience. That is where I came from, and I think that she had the same type of experience as I did growing up. Those skills stay with you for a very long time, and they are skills that we pass on to our children. Societal issues are also part of it, and we need to look at those.

I do not know whether she touched on this issue, but I think that I linked it in with how many of our children actually know where their food comes from. I have been working with a couple of our schools in North Belfast, and I can think of one — Abbots Cross — which has a fruit and vegetable garden and a compost heap. That is really important for some children because they may not be high academic achievers, but they want to be outside working in the garden. That needs to be part of our education system so that children have opportunities to be outside in the open air working and looking at where produce comes from. Those are all good points.

I am conscious of time, so I will move on to Mr Durkan. He raised the good point about promoting good mental health through healthy eating. That also includes the increasing pressures into looking perfect. So, when we look at the issue of obesity —

Mr Durkan: *[Interruption.]*

Ms P Bradley: Mr Durkan, I think that you look nearly perfect. It is not just obesity that we have to look at; we have to look at the other issues where we have people with eating disorders and issues with emotional and mental health. We know that bullying takes place in our schools, we know that our children are under immense pressure to conform and to be a certain way, and we do not want to see any aspect of this being put upon them that they have to conform to that way.

He made several points and said that he believes that some people in his area have never eaten fresh fruit or vegetables. Every one of us in the Chamber could say that we have constituents whose children may not have had that. That is shame on us as well. That is something that we need to address and get that learning out there of the health benefits and understanding of how to use fruit and

vegetables to make something that is appealing for children. I know that, as a parent, it can often be difficult to do.

Mr O'Dowd agreed with the principle and the intentions of the motion and said that they were very good, although he expressed that it was foolish to ring-fence money, given that we did not know the amount and that that would be an Executive decision. I understand and respect that point of view. I welcome Sinn Féin's general support on this issue, albeit that I know that it will vote against it. However, I note that it is generally supportive of the principles.

Mr Smith talked about obese children becoming obese adults. That is absolutely correct. It is a hard habit to break, and that is why we need to start early.

I will move swiftly through because I am coming to the end of my time. A lot of Members raised the same issues. I want to finish off with Eamonn McCann and the Minister. When Mr McCann said that he had listened to the debate and had very little to object to, I knew at that stage that we were ready for a "but". I am glad that that "but" came because I am of the same general opinion as he is when it comes to deprivation and health inequalities. We have seen time and time again that your outcome and how long you live depends on your postcode and where you live in Northern Ireland. So I fully understand that "but". I agree with that, I think that there is absolute merit in that, and I also understand the disposable income issue. For families on a lower income, it can sometimes be cheaper to buy fast food than to fill a basket and prepare a fresh meal. We need to look at that and look at ways to combat that because there are ways with a wiser knowledge of cooking.

Just to finish, on the Minister's point, the motion called for an educational programme. We are not saying that that money has to be poured into education. That is not what we are saying. It is not a silo. We are saying that every Department — *[Interruption.]* — needs to form part of an education programme.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 61; Noes 22.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms

Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Hamilton, Ms Hanna, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann, Mr McCausland, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Mr McQuillan, Ms Mallon, Mr Mullan, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Smith, Mr Stalford, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Bradshaw and Mr Lyttle

NOES

Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuigan, Mr McMullan, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Archibald and Ms J McCann

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 58; Noes 23.

AYES

Mr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Carroll, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Hamilton, Ms Hanna, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mrs Little Pengelly, Ms Lockhart, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Mr E McCann, Mr McCausland, Mr McGrath, Miss McIlveen, Mr McKee, Mr McNulty, Mr McPhillips, Mr McQuillan, Ms Mallon, Mr Mullan, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Smith, Mr Stalford, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Bradshaw and Mr Lyttle

NOES

Mr Agnew, Ms Archibald, Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Fearon, Ms Gildernew, Mr Kearney, Mr Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGuigan, Mr McMullan, Mr Milne, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó Muilleoir, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Archibald and Ms J McCann

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly encourages schoolchildren to live a healthier lifestyle; acknowledges that following the introduction of a levy on drinks with a high sugar content, an estimated £18 million will be allocated from the Treasury to the Executive's Budget in 2018; notes with concern that only approximately 6% of pupils in each primary year are accessing two or more hours' physical education per week; calls on the Minister of Finance to ring-fence this money to fund an educational awareness and physical education programme in schools to benefit the long-term health of our children and to ease pressure on the health service; and further calls on the Minister of Education to improve the monitoring and reporting of physical education hours per week accessed by primary pupils and to issue a public consultation on the introduction of a statutory obligation on schools to facilitate an appropriate minimum amount of physical education hours per week for primary-school pupils.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Education Services: West Belfast

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Ms Jennifer McCann to raise the matter of education services in West Belfast. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Ms J McCann: I am delighted to have the opportunity tonight — it is not really "tonight", it is the afternoon — to open the Adjournment debate. We have been talking a lot in the

Assembly about our children and young people. I want to say first of all that all our children and young people not only deserve but are entitled to equality of opportunity to whatever career path they decide to follow or life choices that they make. We have often heard that having a good experience in our educational lives from nursery provision to further education contributes to our overall personal development and growth and that having a bad experience can often have a negative impact right through into our adult life. I have spoken to many people who have had an experience at school that has followed them and had an impact throughout their life. Therefore, it is important that we have positive experiences in our formative years, particularly in our time at school and other places of learning.

4.45 pm

We see more and more evidence linking deprivation, poverty and social exclusion to underachievement and poor educational outcomes for our children and young people. However, when that is recognised and focused learning interventions and support mechanisms are put in place, educational attainment can be enhanced even in areas of high social and economic deprivation. We need to see those intervention programmes at an early stage of a child or young person's life. It is very important to say that we can then raise the educational attainment of that child or young person.

The west Belfast community education programme is an innovative project that works closely with local schools, teachers, parents, community providers and the children and young people themselves. The main driver of that programme is the West Belfast Partnership Board. I commend the partnership board for the work that it has done for years in this field across West Belfast. The board has given real life experiences and turned around not only children and young people's educational attainment but their personal development. It has changed the lives of some of the young people and their families. The programme supports a shared learning approach that sees the importance of a child-centred approach to education as a way of making a real difference to the educational outcomes that we all need to aspire to. It incorporates key priorities identified by the Department of Education and the West Belfast Partnership Board together, including early years development and the importance of family and parental engagement that focuses on developing increased aspirations of the family for their child. For me, that is a very important and key element. We have to ensure that the parents or carers of a child or young

person have that aspiration for the young person as well. Nothing will make a child get on in life and do their best more than encouragement and support from parents or peers, so it is very important that we increase that.

The programme looks at raising literacy and numeracy standards and provides support for post-primary pupils to improve GCSE attainment. My party colleagues and I have witnessed that for several years at the Easter and summer schools that the West Belfast Partnership Board puts on in St Mary's University College in West Belfast. We have seen hundreds of kids, initially kids from the west Belfast area but now kids from all over Belfast, coming to those and giving up free time over their Easter and summer holidays to try to do better in their exams. There is also a transitions programme that makes the transition period much easier for children who are transferring to post-primary school. We have all seen at first hand how it works.

A report by the Department of Education in September 2014 looked at children and young people who attended schools in West Belfast and identified the area as one of deprivation where children are disadvantaged in their educational opportunities.

The report went on to say that, following a number of intervention programmes, there were increased levels of school attendance and improved GCSE results. I want to give a flavour of the way those results increased. There was an increase of 11.4% in pupils in West Belfast achieving five GCSE grades A* to C from 2011 to 2015, and there was a 12.3% increase in pupils achieving five GCSEs, including maths and English, from the figures released in 2013 in comparison with the results in 2015. Among pupils who are eligible for free school meals, the increase in attainment is even greater. There was a 12.2% increase in students achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C from 2013 to 2015. There was a 14.3% increase in eligible students achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, including maths and English, from 2013 to 2015. There was a 17.3% increase in students eligible for free school meals achieving seven or more GCSEs at grades A* to C from 2013 to 2015. That is a spectacular improvement right across the piece.

While there are a lot of different drivers in getting that educational attainment up, one of the key drivers was the partnership approach that was driven by the West Belfast Partnership

Board's education programme. I want to make it very clear that that was one of the key drivers.

I mentioned earlier the Easter and summer schools that take place and that see hundreds of young people giving up their free time. The programme also puts an emphasis on a joined-up approach to look at the consistency of the transition from nursery to primary and to post-primary. That is not just about the West Belfast Partnership Board's part in this but about all stakeholders in education, including the Department of Education, all the schools, the teachers and the parents and, as I said earlier, particularly the children and young people themselves. It takes that holistic approach. Going forward, we want to see that very clear holistic approach to delivering improved educational outcomes and a focus on effective interventions and interventions that are measured and evaluated. This is where it works.

We hear about all the efforts that we make to get to the root causes of underachievement. We rehearse them in the Chamber and have talked about them in the community as well. We know that, if you are from a socially or economically deprived area or, for whatever reason, your family is not as affluent as another family, those issues impact on your education. They impact when you are at school and on your achievement. We need to have that holistic approach. It goes back to my central point: in my view, it is the entitlement of every child to have the same lifetime opportunities as another child. It should not matter what that child's social or economic background is; they all have that entitlement, particularly in education. They should have it right through, not just in getting ready for school but in going through nursery school, primary school, post-primary and to further education.

I wanted to illustrate the way in which that partnership approach to education, which involves the whole community and involves everybody, has benefits and leads to the positive results that I have just outlined. I have to emphasise that it is not just about kids getting their exams and about getting that educational attainment up. It is about the confidence that it gives those young people. I see it myself. I see them coming in and they are so full of confidence when they have achieved this. Their social exclusion goes down; their sense of themselves and their confidence goes up; and we all aspire to that for our children.

I say to the Minister that I am very happy to see him here, and I will be listening to what other

Members have to say. I ask him what his intentions are for continuing such programmes. You have something that is a good model of practice. We have seen it working in an area of social and economic deprivation, so we appeal to you to make sure that those programmes continue, not just in West Belfast but across wider Belfast, and even beyond, to give that sense of achievement to our children and young people.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): All Members who are called to speak will have up to five minutes.

Mr Attwood: I thank Jennifer McCann for bringing the topic to the Chamber and welcome the fact that the Minister is here. The reason that I say that is because the debate is very timely. We are now closer to the eve of the publication of the Programme for Government. In my view, when it comes to West Belfast and other areas of need and disadvantage, the PFG has to be a paradigm shift. It has to be a paradigm shift when it comes to education provision and support for those who are about to go to school and those who are at school.

I concur with Ms McCann that the achievements of our schools and other educational interventions in West Belfast are immense. There are great schools, great results, great interventions and great community initiatives when it comes to education. At the same time, if you go through West Belfast — this was my experience in April, May and June on the lower Shankill and other parts of West Belfast and in the months before and since — there are areas and communities where too many people believe that the power of the state, the work of political parties and the interventions of all ranges of public bodies will not change their objective experience. They feel that, whatever the state and others may do, it will not work for them. That is a sad narrative this long after the ceasefires and the devolution of government.

When it comes to education provision, I want to put some questions to the Minister. In that regard, I anticipate the meeting that I will have with him next Tuesday afternoon, at which these are some of the issues that we will need to touch on. If we do not shape a paradigm shift, there is a risk that those people in those communities who feel the way that I have outlined will feel that more intensely. Here are the measures that, in my view, when it comes to education provision in West Belfast, will define the future as something different from the past.

The first point to make is that we need a comprehensive strategy for those who are brought to six that embraces the child and takes care of the child, the family, the parents and the grandparents up to the point that the child enters nursery and formal schooling. If we do not have a paradigm shift in that regard in educational and other family and child supports, we will not be able to change more fundamentally the circumstances that are experienced in communities in West Belfast. We need to borrow from the Scandinavian model or, more accurately, from the New Zealand model, when it comes to provision and support for those who are newly born up until when they enter nursery education and primary school, across the range of all those who interface with those children. As part of that, my second point is that, if you are not making adequate provision for childcare for a parent or parents with young children when they are in school or about to go into school, you will not be able to deal comprehensively with the needs of that family and maximise the opportunities for those children when they go into education or are going through education, not least in West Belfast. My questions to the Minister are these: will there be a paradigm shift when it comes to the 0-6 strategy and will there be a paradigm shift when it comes to childcare?

I have a third challenge for the Minister, and this is where he will have to join up with other Ministers. The most mature economic development policies on these islands have targeted strategies that bring entrepreneurship and enterprise into the school estate. There are enterprise programmes whereby pupils in the school system, including in West Belfast, are given all sorts of opportunities —

5.00 pm

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

Mr Attwood: — to develop an enterprise and an entrepreneurial culture. Those are some of the measures of a paradigm shift. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for bringing this to the Floor. It is an important issue. In our constituency, one of the issues in educational services that we hear about most is that of classroom assistants for statemented children. Increasingly, we hear about the devastatingly long waiting times for children who need statements to receive them. Those waiting times have a detrimental effect not just on the children's educational needs but, as we hear

from parents in West Belfast, on the well-being of the children and their families, because of the undue stress that they are forced to endure. Too often, we hear that, even when eventually statemented, children face barriers to getting the assistance that they need. Children with special needs and autistic students have to fight to get the educational assistance that they need and deserve. People Before Profit thinks that that is a shocking state of affairs. The journey that parents face to get their children the warranted amount of help is a long one riddled with undue stress.

The blame does not fall at the feet of the classroom assistants employed to help the children. As often as we hear from parents of children with learning difficulties, we hear from classroom assistants how under pressure they are. Indeed, a recent UNISON trade union article articulates just how under pressure, undervalued and underfunded they are. They have to fight to secure a permanent contract, now a pipe dream for most classroom assistants. They are understaffed in a way that affects their already huge workload. The lack of job security and the lack of hours, coupled with an increasing workload, can have harmful effects on schoolchildren, as we heard from Members from the constituency.

Most Members here will be aware that, in the past, classroom assistants have had to take industrial action against the Executive in their fight for better working conditions and job security. They may well be forced to take industrial action again to fight for better working conditions and, as a result, better learning conditions for children, who are being let down and left behind. If the classroom assistants choose to take industrial action, they will have the full support of People Before Profit and, I hope, of others in the Chamber.

I do not raise those issues simply to highlight them. If I am inundated with horror stories, I am sure that others in the Chamber and from West Belfast are as well. We need to look at the other issue of impending amalgamations and further cuts, which will have a drastic effect. People across constituencies are concerned about those, particularly in West Belfast. I repeat that I do not raise the issues simply to highlight them; I raise them as a stark warning to the Executive that, if they do not get off their hands, listen to those on the ground and alleviate the situation, those on the ground will no doubt be forced to make the changes themselves by taking action. If they are forced to do so — I encourage them to do so — I will be there supporting them. Unless something is done, classroom assistants, vulnerable children

and the community of West Belfast as a whole will continue to be let down.

Mr Humphrey: I speak as a Member for North Belfast, but I am a governor of two schools in the greater Shankill. I declare an interest in respect of both of them. I welcome the debate and thank the Member for securing it.

Before coming here, I spoke to the principals of some of the local primary schools. I pay tribute to the principals' group in the greater Shankill for the work that it has done and the leadership that it has given. I commend teachers, governors, parents and, of course, the young people themselves for the results starting to emerge from the area. Clearly, improvements are happening there that I very much welcome. They told me the three things that they see as important: the continuation of funding for targeting social need, the effects of social deprivation and social difficulties. Of course, I agree with that. All those are linked to the socio-economic difficulties that prevail: paramilitarism, deprivation and social exclusion.

I think that, as other Members have said, the key is early intervention not just in education but in all aspects of government. I welcome the joined-up approach in the Shankill. Local representatives have joined together with the Agreed Agenda group, with Jackie Redpath, the chief executive of the Greater Shankill Partnership, taking the lead on that along with Nicola Verner. Until recently, the partnership was led by Thomas Scott. Leadership has been given by the partnership board and Integrated Services, again led by Nicola Verner.

The Minister will know that there could be three new primary schools in the greater Shankill: one in the upper part, which would involve Springhill Primary School and Black Mountain Primary School; one in the lower part that could involve Edenbrooke Primary School and Malvern Primary School; and the new Glenwood Primary School. I very much welcome the development and the funding that has been provided. Construction at the school comes to a conclusion with the new Edenderry Nursery School at Lanark Way, which is the first phase of the new Glenwood Primary School. I look forward to the Minister making an early decision on funding for Glenwood and a new school there.

I want to look at Springfield Primary School as an example. I attended a meeting in Springfield in 2005 when I was a councillor for Court. The school had 74 pupils, it was failing, and educational achievement was not great. Last year, I had the honour of opening an extension

to the school, which now has 176 pupils. That school is doing tremendous work with young people who are progressing to secondary education, many of them to grammar schools. That is good news. Of course, that is all in the primary sector.

I also want to talk about the secondary sector. In recent times, only a few weeks ago, I was invited to go back to my old school, the Boys' Model, for its presentation day, and I was amazed at the standards and the improvements that there have been. There were five days of presentations, and I was able to attend only one: the senior school presentations. I have to say that the advances that have been made there, the uplift in educational achievement and the confidence and competence of those young people were absolutely amazing. I also attended the Girls' Model presentations and was delighted to see such great forward movement there. The leadership of Alan Logan and Emlyn Wright respectively in those two schools has to be commended. Unfortunately, I was invited but was unable to go to Hazelwood Integrated College a few weeks ago because of a public meeting that I had organised in my constituency, but I know that you, Minister, attended and were greatly impressed.

I have to say that, as we go forward, many of the challenges that face North Belfast and West Belfast, which are the same challenges right across the constituencies, which are divided by the Shankill Road, are faced by those young people. When I speak to principals and those in leadership, such as the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), and see the work that is going on in schools in North Belfast, I am encouraged to see general improvement. I commend the Department for its work in the area, but, in particular, I commend teachers. Teachers are often criticised. As I said, I am a governor of two schools. Governors are hugely indebted to the hard work of dedicated teachers. When a school is led by a very good and dedicated principal who is determined to turn a school round, that makes a difference. I pay tribute to the work that has been done. I pay tribute —

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

Mr Humphrey: Yes. I pay tribute to the Agreed Agenda group, where the parties meet, for the action zone that has been established, which has made a great difference. That sort of joined-up governance really is the key and solution, in my view, to dealing with the problems in West Belfast and North Belfast.

Mr Allen: I thank the proposer of the Adjournment topic for bringing this important debate to the House. Indeed, I enjoyed having the opportunity to speak in a previous Adjournment debate that was secured by the Member in January.

I declare an interest as a voluntary trustee of an organisation that provides community-based and alternative education packages to individuals. Also, my wife is a teaching assistant in a local primary school, so I know only too well, and at first hand, the difficulties that teaching assistants and teachers face on a daily basis. I commend and pay tribute to those teachers — not just in West Belfast, North Belfast or my constituency of East Belfast, but right across the Province — who day and daily go above and beyond to support our children.

As a father of two young children in the early days of their primary-school education, I think it is important and imperative that we involve parents centrally in the education of our children. Indeed, I very much welcome the opportunity when I can go to the school for my children's review and be able to complement the work of the teachers and classroom assistants in supporting my children. I hope that the Minister will continue to look at that because those reviews, with parents involved centrally in their children's education, are a cornerstone of going forward.

Education is a fundamental human right and essential for the exercising of all other human rights. It promotes individual freedom and empowerment and yields important development benefits. It is a powerful tool by which economically and socially marginalised adults and children can lift themselves out of poverty and participate fully as citizens. It is well documented, however, that not all of our citizens do well in the educational setting, whether primary school, secondary school or college. I place on record my admiration for those community-based and alternative education programmes that have set up and gone out of their way to support those who have not been able to fit into the education setting in school in the way that they had perhaps hoped.

The proposer of the topic made mention of bad experiences in school, and I am testimony to that. I was an individual who, through my own fault — I will not attempt to place the burden upon anybody else — found myself slipping down a path that I did not necessarily want to. However, when it became evident that I did not want to go down that path, I had slipped down

that slope too far. I am very grateful to the Link Centre, which encompasses the Open Doors programme. It got me back on the path and the journey that I needed to be on to achieve a degree of proper educational attainment. That is what led me to choose a career in the military. Some might say, "Look at you now. That wasn't the right career or the right path," but I would not hesitate to do it all over again. I would do it in a heartbeat because it has created and shaped me into the person I am today.

In finishing, I offer my support. Things can get slightly hot and heavy in the Chamber at times between the Opposition and the Executive parties, such as yesterday. However, my party leader said that we will be a constructive Opposition and work with the Executive where we can. This is one area that I feel passionate about, and I will work with the Minister in any way that I can to support our young people.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this Adjournment debate as second-generation West Belfast and as the education spokesperson for the party. Whilst the issues that affect West Belfast are maybe more acute there, they do have an impact on other constituencies as well. So, whilst the issues that are being raised here today are constituency-specific, they do reach out to other places across the North.

I was shocked by the statistic that 38% of people in West Belfast hold no qualifications at all. We are doing a bit of a disservice if we have that amount of people being educated only up to a certain level. We do need to review it, take that step back and say, "What could we be doing better and in a more joined-up approach to try to deal with the issue?"

5.15 pm

To take my particular slant in looking at this, I do not think that the issue lies solely with the schools. There really are some very good schools in West Belfast; some leaders in education in that area. If we look at the inspections, we can see that all of the post-primaries in the constituency have achieved a satisfactory rating or higher and all but one of the primary schools were deemed satisfactory and higher. Schools are being rated very highly in the area for the work that they are doing. Let us look at the wider picture, at some of the other things that are happening in the constituency that are negatively impacting on the education of our young people in an area that has 39% of children living in poverty. That

is a stark contrast to the Northern Ireland average of 21%. It is a constituency where the life expectancy of men is 74 and women is 80, which are among the lowest in Northern Ireland. It has some of the highest rates of people on disability benefit, and I think that we can assume from that that there is a significantly higher proportion of children undertaking caring responsibilities in the home as well.

We need to support and improve health services in the constituency to try to restrict the negative impact that this is possibly having on children and their education. I would always say that we could invest in youth services and youth clubs in West Belfast, which would greatly enhance the opportunities for children in the area; it would give them good positive role models and positive engagement. There are lots of services there, and I am sure that, if they were enhanced and strengthened, it would support the social and personal development of young people, all of which would help to raise self-esteem and, as was referred to earlier, could contribute to improvements in the classroom environment. We should not underestimate the impact of breakfast and homework clubs. Evidence shows that breakfast clubs set young people up for a good day at school and help with their concentration. Homework clubs can help some young people, who maybe cannot get support at home with homework, by giving them support, getting them into the classroom and giving them the pride that their homework is completed. If there are initiatives like that in the area, they should continue to be supported and, if possible, rolled out a bit more. There are many issues, but there are lots of solutions. If we do all that we can to draw them together, we should hopefully be able to make an impact and reduce the underachievement that there is in West Belfast.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate tonight. West Belfast gets a lot of bad publicity, and the previous Member who spoke mentioned some of the issues, including, for example, the highest rates of child poverty, lowest life expectancy, highest unemployment at various times, and all of that. It is one of the most deprived constituencies.

Yet, if a stranger arrived in Belfast and asked to be directed to the top-achieving school at A level in the North, where would they be directed to? Straight to that area, right to the Falls Road in the heart of West Belfast, St Dominic's — the top-achieving school at A level. Also on the Falls Road in West Belfast, you have Coláiste Feirste, which is bursting at the seams. It is undergoing a £14 million refurbishment and

redevelopment and, when that development is complete, it still will not have room for all the children who want to go to that school. It is already one of the top achieving non-selective schools in the North; it is also the largest post-primary Irish-medium school on the island of Ireland.

I have talked about this before in the Chamber: a piece of research was released in the Long Gallery just before Christmas last year called 'School Inspection in a Polycentric Context'. The theory behind it is that individual schools on their own can only reach a certain level of achievement, but, when schools collaborate and cooperate and there is an overarching inspection, all results can increase. The research was carried out at the behest of ERASMUS, under the auspices of the West Belfast Partnership Board, and was conducted by academics from Dublin City University.

Jennifer McCann referred to the results of such an approach: an increase of 14.3% at GCSE level among children on free school meals. The district inspector from the Education and Training Inspectorate, Dr Paddy Shevlin, described that as spectacular, and it is spectacular. I defy anyone to point me to anywhere else in the North where such a leap in attainment has taken place.

What have we got in West Belfast? First, the children and young people are no more and no less intelligent than children anywhere else, but it is clear that something different is taking place. There is a template there, and it is all in the report on the polycentric inspection. Area learning communities have been established at nursery, primary and post-primary level, where schools work and cooperate on problems that are identified in the system. There are problems in transition years from nursery to primary level and from primary to post-primary, so the area learning communities are working to ameliorate those problems. The teacher from the local primary school comes to the nursery school for a few weeks before the end of term and the children get to know her or him, and it makes the transition all the easier. Similarly, projects are carried out at transition years from primary to post-primary.

Of course, there are the Easter schools. We all know how important English and maths are at GCSE level. Without English and maths, it is difficult for kids to move on to third-level education. What do the Easter schools do? They identify children who are sitting on a borderline C/D grade for English and maths, and those children get a week of intensive tuition at St Mary's University College. The

children are brought into a university setting and given intensive tuition for a week, and the results are phenomenal: a 78% pass rate for maths, 82% for English. That is what is happening in West Belfast.

I know that the Minister is aware of it; I know that he was Chair of the Education Committee when the partnership board came in and presented on it; and I know that he was impressed by what he heard. I ask the Minister to continue to fund the cutting-edge work that is happening in education in West Belfast —

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

Mr Sheehan: — and help to have it rolled out elsewhere. I thank Jennifer McCann for bringing the debate and ask the Minister to continue the funding.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank Jennifer McCann for bringing the issue to the Floor today. It is an opportunity to discuss educational issues and to highlight the important role that all of us have as a community in ensuring that our children and young people achieve their full potential. As Pat Sheehan indicated, there have been tremendous successes in changing academic achievement, and that is very much to be celebrated. As the proposer of the Adjournment debate also indicated, in addition to the academic successes, it goes beyond that and is about ensuring that children can reach their full potential.

I welcome the tone of the debate, which has been positive. It is right that, while we highlight the issues — a number of Members have highlighted important issues that I hope to address — we take a little time to celebrate the achievements and the efforts of the people who are working on the ground, be it in schools or in the wider community. We should embrace that positive note.

Generally speaking, all the contributions were fairly positive. I appreciate that, possibly slightly playing to stereotype, there was something of a call to the barricades by People Before Profit. I am sure that it is glad to know that the solidarity will always be there for People Before Profit on all occasions.

It is the case that, if we are looking to achieve full potential, evidence of securing that outcome can be particularly challenging where there are areas of high deprivation, particularly, as has been highlighted by Members, in areas such as

West Belfast. We also know — it has been highlighted here today — that, where there is appropriate and timely support, positive outcomes can be achieved. I am encouraged by the improvement in attainment of our young people resident in that area and, indeed, across Northern Ireland. As Education Minister for the last four and a half months, I take complete credit for that, rather than in any way suggesting that there was any good work done prior to my appointment. In all seriousness, though, education can be beneficial to the economy and to the community, but it can be particularly beneficial to the individual. It can be that one great, life-changing experience. Mr Allen made a very positive contribution, for which I thank him. At one stage, I thought that he was going to warn that, if you did not study hard at school, you were in danger of ending up as an MLA. Maybe that should be a warning across our education system. On a range of issues that Mr Allen raised, there can be good work done across the Chamber.

I am determined as much as possible to take action to break the link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement. While recent statistics demonstrate a continued upward trend in the performance of school-leavers, there will always be a need to address low performance where there are significant gaps between our most and least deprived pupils. I am totally committed to targeting resources wherever they are needed most.

Members sought assurances that we intend to continue funding the projects. It is certainly something I am supportive of, particularly when it comes to the roll-out. That will also be very useful. Looking at some of the Members opposite, I ask that, if there are any good words that they can have with the Finance Minister, their intervention would be appreciated.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I am happy to give way.

Mr Sheehan: I am glad to hear that you are willing to look at the continued funding of the projects. I did not have enough time during my contribution to mention nurture units. They are not unique to West Belfast, and I am not sure whether there has been an official evaluation. Certainly, anecdotal evidence coming back is that they have been a phenomenal success, and I ask the Minister to consider funding for them.

Mr Weir: I am happy to deal with that issue and will come to it in a moment.

Mr Attwood raised the issue of early intervention for those who are not up to six. It is undoubtedly the case that the best intervention is where you get early intervention, particularly with the 0-6 strategy. Looking at two priorities for funding in what are difficult times, I say that it is, first, about getting the maximum amount directly to the front-line service in our schools, but allied to that is getting as much protection and, where possible, expansion of funding for early intervention as possible.

I have visited both the West Belfast Partnership Board and the Children and Young People Zone in the Shankill. One of the things that very much struck me is the building of work that happens from year zero upwards in both areas. There is an acceptance that there needs to be that early intervention.

Specifically — this is an area in which West Belfast has been a leader — Mr Sheehan mentioned the nurture units. There was a recent evaluation by Queen's University that indicated the high level of success there, not simply for the children going through the nurture units but in a whole-school improvement where it happens. I will look to mainstream that funding and see what expansion can take place. I have given an assurance to the 32 nurture units across Northern Ireland that, until we are in a position to announce any degree of new nurture scheme, their funding is secure. West Belfast has been at the cutting edge there. There have been five nurture awards UK-wide that affect Northern Ireland, and two of the five recipients have been Holy Trinity Primary School and St Joseph's Primary School on Slate Street. Shortly before I became Minister, I was at Slate Street, and Mr McCann was there as well. It was tremendous to see the spirit of pastoral care that has been developed by nurture units. It is about having that level of intervention.

The Department has made funding available to early years providers and schools throughout the area, and specific mention has been made of some of the direct interventions in West Belfast. There are a total of 56 schools that currently qualify for extended schools programme funding. Mr McGrath made reference to some of the good work that happens through the breakfast clubs and homework clubs. There has been specific mention, through the West Belfast Partnership Board, of the focus on Easter examinations on that basis.

5.30 pm

Mr McGrath made the very valid point that it is not simply about what happens in the classroom. Mention was made of the levels of educational attainment in West Belfast. There has been an issue of too many in the adult population being without qualifications, and there are two answers to that. First, we need to try to ensure that we do not have that problem with the next generation. Secondly, when looking at further education and intervention work on a multi-departmental basis, you do not simply write off those who do not have qualifications. Intervention is needed there.

In West Belfast, £385,000 has been made available to support the full service community network programme, and £340,000 has been awarded to nine childcare settings through the school age childcare grant scheme. Mr Attwood raised the issue of the children and young people's strategy, which we hope to bring forward reasonably soon. That has to be aligned with the PFG. He is right that it is a major challenge for the Executive as a whole because, realistically, if there is to be a step change, it will not be funded directly by the Department of Education; there has to be a wider commitment.

Mr Allen: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: Yes, I will give way briefly.

Mr Allen: This does not relate directly to West Belfast, but an issue that has been brought before me recently is the difficulty that Employers for Childcare Solutions has encountered as a result of now having to pay VAT on childcare services. Will the Minister give an undertaking to work with the Department of Health to look at that issue? I know that it is also involved.

Mr Weir: I am certainly happy to look at that issue, even if it is outside my Department. I suspect that the VAT issue may be a result of national decisions that lie outside our control, but I am certainly happy to look at that.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Attwood: You raised the point about interdepartmental work. Given the opportunity to pool funds, further to Steven Agnew's Act, are you indicating that, across Departments,

there will be pooled funds to deal with children's needs and services?

Mr Weir: An active group, concentrating on the Department of Education and the Department of Health, is looking at how we can improve outcomes. That group arose from that Act and other legislation. When the Special Educational Needs Bill was going through, for example, a range of amendments was proposed to try to secure that.

There is also — this touches on one of the Member's other main points about entrepreneurship — a strong need, particularly when we look at the curriculum, for work between the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy. We should not have a silo mentality when it comes to schools; we should also look to further education colleges. There is support from the Department for productive relationships between schools and employers. We fund the young enterprise scheme, and I was at a session of Business in the Community last week. I have seen, particularly in West Belfast, very strong linkages between employers and local firms and schools. Recently, I was at the Aisling awards — I thought at one stage that they were going to be called the Ó Muilleoir awards — and the strong commitment seen there was a tremendous example to other communities of buy-in to entrepreneurship. That is also an important issue.

I had the opportunity to visit the partnership board before I became Minister. I was a DUP Chair visiting in a private capacity, so the visit had a slight element or quality of Nixon in China. I was incredibly impressed by what was happening there. I have also had the opportunity to visit the children's zone on the Shankill. There is very good work in both communities on transition, which is an important, sometimes neglected, issue.

Mr Humphrey raised the issue of early intervention and how support for that can be provided by way of a new school build. I am glad that the Department has pushed ahead with that. It is clear from the contributions to the debate that this issue goes well beyond the boundaries of West Belfast, even if we have some of its sons and daughters contributing.

The greater Shankill zone is not the first initiative to have taken place in the area. The interpretation of those directly involved is that the quality is higher when it is focused on the grass roots and driven from there up. The same is true of the West Belfast Partnership Board: it was there that we got the highest

level of buy-in. From that point of view, I am keen to see those developing. As Pat Sheehan said, there are very positive outcomes, and we are seeing collaboration and coordination not only between schools but between educational achievement and the rest of the community. As the proposer of the Adjournment topic realised, it is vital that there is not only buy-in from the community in general but buy-in from parents in particular. It is a considerable advantage when parents have aspirations for their children to try to deliver, which we see in West Belfast.

I am keen to support the ongoing work. I intend to work closely with schools, early years, childcare providers, the Youth Service, which sometimes has a Cinderella quality, and educational stakeholders to ensure that we meet the needs and aspirations. As with a lot of things, I have that commitment. To a certain extent, the opportunity to do this as well as possible will be driven by finance and the greatest support that we can get from the Executive as a whole. There is much good innovative practice, and much of what is happening in West Belfast can serve as a role model for what is happening elsewhere, even in sharing practice.

I see that time is counting down against me. Overall, in West Belfast, between communities and education sectors, within education sectors and across the board, we have to continue to work collaboratively to share expertise and support teachers and school leaders because school leadership can be absolutely vital. We should all aspire to do that and to raise overall standards of attainment. I welcome the collective spirit that Mr Allen spoke of, with Government and Opposition working closely together, at least on this issue.

Adjourned at 5.37 pm.

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