



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 15 November 2016
Volume 117, No 4

Contents

Private Members' Business

Middletown Centre for Autism 1
Nurture Provision..... 17

Oral Answers to Questions

Education..... 27
Communities..... 36

Assembly Business..... 45

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer..... 46

Infrastructure..... 46
Health 49

Private Members' Business

Nurture Provision (*Continued*)..... 55

Adjournment

Cookstown Social Security Office: Proposed Closure 61

Assembly Members

Agnew, Steven (North Down)
Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Anderson, Sydney (Upper Bann)
Archibald, Ms Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)
Attwood, Alex (West Belfast)
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Bell, Jonathan (Strangford)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Boyle, Ms Michaela (West Tyrone)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dobson, Mrs Jo-Anne (Upper Bann)
Douglas, Sammy (East Belfast)
Dunne, Gordon (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Eastwood, Colum (Foyle)
Farry, Stephen (North Down)
Fearon, Ms Megan (Newry and Armagh)
Ford, David (South Antrim)
Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gildernew, Ms Michelle (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Girvan, Paul (South Antrim)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hale, Mrs Brenda (Lagan Valley)
Hamilton, Simon (Strangford)
Hanna, Ms Claire (South Belfast)
Hazzard, Chris (South Down)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hussey, Ross (West Tyrone)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kennedy, Danny (Newry and Armagh)
Little Pengelly, Mrs Emma (South Belfast)
Lockhart, Ms Carla (Upper Bann)
Logan, Phillip (North Antrim)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCann, Eamonn (Foyle)
McCann, Fra (West Belfast)
McCann, Ms Jennifer (West Belfast)
McCartney, Raymond (Foyle)
McCausland, Nelson (North Belfast)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McElduff, Barry (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McGuinness, Martin (Foyle)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McKee, Harold (South Down)
McMullan, Oliver (East Antrim)
McNulty, Justin (Newry & Armagh)
McPhillips, Richie (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
McQuillan, Adrian (East Londonderry)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (West Belfast)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Milne, Ian (Mid Ulster)
Morrow, The Lord (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Mullan, Gerry (East Londonderry)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (Speaker)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
Ó Muilleoir, Máirtín (South Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
Overend, Mrs Sandra (Mid Ulster)
Palmer, Mrs Jenny (Lagan Valley)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Ross, Alastair (East Antrim)
Ruane, Ms Caitriona (South Down)
Seeley, Ms Catherine (Upper Bann)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Smith, Philip (Strangford)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (North Down)
Wells, Jim (South Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 November 2016

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Middletown Centre for Autism

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

Mr McElduff: I beg to move

That this Assembly is deeply concerned by the failure to provide residential assessments and therapies at the Middletown Centre for Autism; believes that this represents a setback for autism services across the island of Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Education to work with his Executive colleagues and the Minister for Education and Skills to evaluate the development of the Middletown Centre for Autism, to renew their commitment to the original priorities of the Middletown Centre for Autism and ensure that all services are fully funded.

The first thing I want to do in the context of the motion is commend the Minister for his visit to the Middletown Centre for Autism in early August. It was not long after he was appointed Minister and was an early initiative on his part. It is all downhill from here. *[Laughter.]* I am only joking. I genuinely want to commend the Minister for visiting the Middletown centre of excellence for autism.

The Middletown centre, most Members will know, is a joint initiative by the Department of Education and the Department of Education and Skills, the two Departments for education on this island. It was opened in March 2007 and is funded by the two Departments on a 50:50 basis. Its key objective is to deliver educational services for children with some of the most complex forms of autism. The centre provides support for those who have been

referred by the Education Authority or by the Department in the Twenty-six Counties — I will say that, if nobody else says it.

I also want to point out that the Middletown centre provides an extensive programme of training and research for parents and professionals. I am very mindful of the stress and pressure that parents feel. Parents of children with autism are very often under immense stress and need a lot of support and respite.

I want to touch briefly on the prevalence of autism in our society. It is generally known that the levels of autism in schoolchildren have more than doubled in the last seven years — I think that the correct figure might be 4,000 children with autism in the North alone — and those children have special educational needs. That obviously presents a very challenging scenario for educationalists, parents and Departments. I will go back to very start and remind Members that autism is a developmental disability that influences a person's ability to communicate and relate to other people as well as affecting how they make sense of the world. Of course, it is a spectrum. Some children and young people will lead quite independent lives, and others will need a lot of support throughout their lives.

Before I return specifically to the Middletown centre, I want to say that, under the Autism Act 2011, the Department of Health leads on the development, implementation, monitoring and reporting of a cross-departmental autism strategy and publishes figures that are extracted from school census data collected by the Department of Education. During the debate, I invite the Minister to respond to questions from the National Autistic Society (NAS) and Autism NI via their jointly published report, 'Broken Promises', which reflects on the effectiveness of the Act. Indeed, I tabled a question in June inviting the Minister to detail his Department's response to the 'Broken Promises' report, and the Minister could, in his response, perhaps provide some elaboration on, for example, whether there are plans in the

Department of Education for specific autism training for teachers, staff, classroom assistants, other education professionals and youth workers. That is the type of recommendation that is included in the 'Broken Promises' report that was initiated by NAS and Autism NI.

The Middletown centre has passed all its tests with flying colours. Joint inspection reports always refer to the exceptional standard of courses and support services that are delivered in the centre, in a child's home and in school settings. The Middletown centre is a very important facility. The Minister has previously pointed out that the focus now appears to be on the delivery of outreach services and that, as the centre has evolved, that is where the focus now appears to lie, but the motion questions that and the residential aspect of the centre, which seems to have been abandoned. Indeed, the Minister acknowledged in previous ministerial statements that residential services would be of value to children and young people in Middletown. The media have reported widely on the abandonment of the residential services aspect of the Middletown centre, and I am trying to get to the bottom of that in the motion.

My colleagues, including Jennifer McCann and Catherine Seeley, and I are trying to get to the bottom of the original concept that residential services would be delivered at Middletown and of the idea that there would be a change, an evolution or a development, and we want to know why there has been a shift in that thinking. I asked a question in the Assembly after the North/South Ministerial Council statement on 3 October regarding the abandonment of residential services. I go back to the point that the original concept of the Middletown centre was that it would provide individual residential support and that pupils between the ages of 11 and 19 would receive appropriate educational interventions for finite time periods, with anticipated educational benefits. That is our concern, and it is reflected strongly in the wording of the motion. However, in the same breath, I want to acknowledge that I detect from the Minister and his Department a commitment to Middletown and to working with the Department of Education and Skills into the future. I wish the Minister and his Department well in that.

Mr Speaker: I call Lord Morrow.

Lord Morrow: Thank you, Mr Speaker, but I did not realise that I was down to speak on this, but, having been called on, I will take the opportunity to say something. I was going to make an intervention when Mr McElduff was

speaking, but I thought better of it. Now that you have called me, I have the opportunity to put the question to the Minister directly.

The Middletown centre is delivering and, according to all the reports, meeting expectations. However, when the centre was first mooted, it was asked — the question remains for the Minister, although he has inherited the issues and will, I suspect, have to give a lot of careful thought to them — whether Middletown was the best place for this type of provision. There are those who told me, quite vociferously, that it was not the proper place and that the facility should have been more central and accessible to the population, rather than on the edge of the border. We accept that it was the former, former Minister of Education, Caitríona Ruane — notorious for making some crazy decisions — who made the decision to put it where it was. We queried it at the time, so we are not coming in late and saying, as an afterthought, that a different location would have been better. However —

Ms Seeley: I thank the Member for giving way; I appreciate that. Does the Member agree that, given that this is an area of cross-border cooperation, it makes sense that the centre is located close to the border?

Lord Morrow: Not really.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute

Lord Morrow: Thank you. The fact that it was on the border was the problem for some of us. We believe that the provision is basically for the people of Northern Ireland. I understand that there are those from the other side of the border who use it, but that raises another question: who is financing it? If it is as you say, is it financed both by the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland? No doubt the Minister will deal with that, and the Member, when she gets up to speak, will deal with it also. Having said that, the provision is essential and important, and it seems to me, from the reports I have heard, that it is fit for purpose and delivering. That is the issue we need to dwell on today.

I listened to Mr McElduff. He was not hypercritical of the Minister; as a matter of fact, he started off very well, but then he warned him that it was all downhill from then on. It was not too bad: the hill did not seem to be that steep. The Sinn Féin motion, although it might seem to start off with criticism of the Minister, veers away from that. Mr McElduff has gone some distance today to curb that criticism, and it has

not been too sharp. We as a party will not vote against the motion —

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Not vote for the motion.

Lord Morrow: Yes, I thought I said that. We will not be voting for the motion because we believe that too many things have been left out of it and it does attack the Minister to some degree, although he is well used to that and it would be like water off a duck's back.

That would not annoy him — not the bit that annoys us. We believe that the motion misses the mark. I will stop there, Mr Speaker.

10.45 am

Mrs Overend: I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the debate as the Ulster Unionist Party's education spokesperson. Fundamentally, at the heart of the motion, we find a very important issue being brought to the House, and that is to ensure that the healthcare, social and educational needs of young people with autism and their families in Northern Ireland are met. With that in mind, we commend the motion.

This is an issue that, in fact, since 2011, the Executive have had a statutory duty to tackle under the Autism Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 via the auspices of the autism strategy, yet, in June 2016, we found ourselves reading the report, which the proposer mentioned, from the National Autistic Society and Autism NI, indicating that, despite all the promises and hype, services are getting worse rather than better. How can it be, five years after the implementation of the Autism Act, that services for those with the condition are actually getting worse, promises are unfulfilled, duties are unmet and young people have been failed? I fear that that is a phrase that we will repeat all too often in the coming years. Indeed, it is not for lack of information that these failures are occurring. In fact, research and studies such as those that go on in Middletown have fed into what is a rich body of knowledge around many of the issues that affect those with the condition.

One of the major areas of concern amongst families of children with autism is that diagnosis is not early enough to make the most of support and advice. A growing body of evidence shows that early intervention can improve social and communication skills in children with autism spectrum disorders. At the beginning of 2016, it was reported that, in the Belfast Trust area,

where autism is most prevalent, children are waiting up to 20 months to receive a diagnosis. That equates roughly to just under two full school years. I, personally, find this absolutely unacceptable, especially considering that it is recommended that a child should wait no more than 13 weeks for diagnosis. Indeed, in the Northern Trust, by August 2016, 58% of children on the waiting list had been waiting for 13 weeks or longer. This was even after the Minister of Health had announced a £2 million investment in autism, which had been available to trusts since 1 April 2016. Whatever the Executive are doing, it is simply not working.

The impact is then felt on the children themselves and their families. Without a statement of diagnosis, children cannot receive the care packages or specialist education that they need. Much of the problem relates to the fact that future estimates of need are turning out to be completely inaccurate. I understand that the rates of children being diagnosed have quadrupled since 2002. It is therefore very unfortunate that many of the services that are provided by centres such as Middletown are accessed much later than is necessary for maximum impact on young people and the quality of their lives.

By all accounts, the Middletown Centre for Autism provides an excellent service and plays a vital role in meeting the needs of children with autism in Northern Ireland. It has outstanding inspection reports. Its research is considered world class. After speaking to many parents, teachers and school principals who have accessed its training, I know that it makes an invaluable difference to the lives of those who have the privilege of availing themselves of the service. One parent recently told me that, once you have understanding and awareness, you eliminate the stigma that is associated with autism. That is something that we need to remember now and in the future. In all walks of life and all Departments, we need to eliminate the stigma that is associated with autism and increase awareness and understanding.

It is unfortunate that the funding model for the Middletown centre is dependent on a different country, which is at the mercy of its own electorate, financial pressures and so on. Unfortunately, that is why we are in the position that we are in at the moment. The Middletown Centre for Autism is funded on a 50:50 basis, as we all know, between the Department of Education here and the Department of Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, in 2009, the then Department of Education and Science in the Republic said that it could not fund the expansion of Middletown

because of financial pressures. Despite the then Minister of Education's protestations, the expansion plans for a residential service never came to fruition.

Therefore, although we support the motion in principle, the Minister will have to secure agreement —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Mrs Overend: Perhaps —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Overend: Yes.

Mr Weir: This will get her an extra minute. The Member indicated, particularly from parental feedback, the invaluable service that Middletown provides. It is a model largely of outreach and direct engagement with parents. In the light of that, will she indicate why she is commending a motion — I appreciate the general remarks made about autism — that would shift Middletown away from being an outreach model towards being a residential model? That would take the centre in the wrong direction for dealing with autism.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for the extra minute and for the opportunity to give my reasons. Outreach is worth so much to people across Northern Ireland, but it has been said to me that it would be useful if teenagers were to have the opportunity to stay over for an assessment. You are assessing children during school days, but they sometimes need to be assessed in the evening time. It has been said to me that that might be useful as well.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McNulty: I thank the signatories to the motion for bringing the issue of the Middletown Centre for Autism to the House today.

The Middletown Centre for Autism is a shining light for cross-border cooperation. It is one of the success stories of joined-up government on the island, and it should be a lesson —

Mr Speaker: For the sake of Hansard, will you pull your mic up? Thank you.

Mr Weir: We are in danger of hearing you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNulty: Ha ha. *[Laughter.]* It should be a lesson to all involved in politics on this island that, when we set our political differences aside, we really can make a difference to the lives of the most vulnerable children in our society. The Middletown Centre for Autism was established in 2007 in response to the joint task force established in 2001 by the Department of Education here and the now Department of Education and Skills in Dublin. It has been, and continues to be, an outstanding success. During 2012, and again earlier this year, a joint North/South independent and rigorous inspection found the quality of work and services on offer at Middletown to be outstanding.

I welcome today's debate, but I am a little perplexed by the motion. Although the vision in 2000-01 up to 2007 was for a centre with residential placement at Middletown for five weeks, five days a week, offering intensive learning and support, thinking has moved on. Researchers, academics and professional experts the world over since then have cautioned against such a short intervention. In fact, they now recommend a whole-life support approach, one that embraces the needs of children at home, in their school and in their community. Instead of working with one child for a short period, they recommend working with the family and the whole school, including teachers, staff and dinner ladies.

The Middletown Centre for Autism is at the heart of my constituency. I know it well, and I know how it works. I visited it just last week. The motion contradicts what all the experts are saying works and what should happen. The original vision for Middletown included a residential element, but research, time and professional opinion have moved on. All the expert advice and thinking points to the current model adopted by the centre as being the one that works best. I want to see the model and, indeed, Middletown grow and expand.

In 2009, when the global economy went into free fall, the Irish Government and the Executive paused the then planned capital expansion for the residential proposals. The centre and its sponsoring Departments engaged experts to review the systems, proposals and programmes. What came out of that review has been an outstanding success.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. I apologise for any facetious remarks that I made earlier, seeing as he now seems to be agreeing with me.

Does he agree that one of the advantages of the different model that has been put in place, the one that has been borne out in time, is that, because the workers deal with children in their own school, there has also been a positive spin-off for the schools? Schools that may not have a particular experience of autism beyond the family of the autistic pupil involved have gained a much greater understanding of autism, and that has prepared them a lot better for having any other children who are somewhere on the autistic spectrum. The current system therefore has an unforeseen benefit.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McNulty: The evidence shows that it has to work for the support network or it will not work for the child.

In 2009, when the global economy went into free fall, the Irish Government and the Executive paused the planned capital expansion for the residential proposals. The centre and its sponsoring Departments engaged with experts to review their systems, proposals and programmes, and what came out of the review has been an outstanding success, as I have already said. The centre developed a model that was more person-centred, benefiting from the multiplier effect of being more focused in the school and in the home, and in 2012 there was a vision for a phased expansion plan for the centre. The Education Ministers at the time, John O'Dowd MLA and Ruairi Quinn TD, gave the green light to an expansion of the services delivered by the centre with a focus on ensuring a sustainable future.

The original vision proposed a five-week intensive residential programme, whereas now a 52-week programme supporting our young people from the age of three to 19 is on offer. The key element of the current approach is to mainstream the support to coordinate a wrap-around service where our young people are getting support in their homes, schools and in their community. It is a transdisciplinary service, including speech, behavioural and educational support. The approach adopted recognises that the support has to work for the group; otherwise, it will not work for the child.

The current model is working above and beyond what was originally envisaged. The recent inspection report said that it offers highly individualised transdisciplinary support for autism to children and young people. It points to evidence that the work being done is impacting significantly on the educational and life experience of referred pupils, their teachers and parents. The original vision was to support

140 cases per year and yet, since 2007, the centre has trained and supported 19,395 parents and 37,172 education and health professional across the island. That is an outstanding achievement.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr McNulty: If any criticism can be made of Middletown, it is maybe that it does not tell its story well enough.

Mr Lunn: I am always glad to discuss Middletown in the House, even on the back of a poorly worded motion, such as this one. I will put Lord Morrow out of his misery straight away: funding for Middletown is 50:50 between the two Governments. On that basis, if you wanted to put it somewhere central it would probably be further south than it is now because it covers the whole of the Republic, as well as us, so Middletown is, I think, a very good location.

We have various problems with the motion. In fact, the only bit that we approve of is the last few words:

"ensure that all services are fully funded."

If Middletown was funded more adequately, we would get a return on it that would be equal to any funding that we provide because it does such terrific work, as others have said.

There is a disparity between what the motion calls for and what would be best for the continuing development of Middletown. Others have referred to the residential aspect. The original idea of Middletown, from memory, was that it would offer five-week residential courses for about 140 or 150 children per annum. That had drawbacks because of the disturbance involved with the children, for a start, and the fact that five weeks is not really long enough. The model that it has developed allows them to, in our case, look after up to 64 children, and it does that through schools, homes and the community in a mainstream way. The treatment and assessment that it provides can last up to a year. So, it is either a year for 64 children or five weeks for 150; the experts in this field are in no doubt which is the better option.

The motion calls for another evaluation. The last evaluation report was in September, just passed, and it was outstanding. The one in 2012 said the same thing — outstanding. These people really deliver value for money,

and the training that they provide for teachers and parents across the island, and the effect that they have on the children they are allowed to concentrate on, is recognised widely. This is a really good scheme and a really good centre. Frankly, they do not want residential down there; it would divert them from what they think is the best option for them.

11.00 am

In terms of ensuring that they are fully funded, their budget was set at £2.174 million in 2012 and that has not been revised. I suppose you could give thanks that it has not been cut again. It is a piffling amount given what they do and the expertise that is required and which they provide. It should have been reviewed at least in line with inflation over those years. The only thing that they did get was £90,000 in one of the recent monitoring rounds to, frankly, avert a crisis in wages, which was what was happening.

I have no doubt that, if the House does nothing else today but ask the Minister to ensure that the service is fully funded, that would be a step forward. Fully funded means more than the £2.174 million per year that was set almost five years ago, Minister, but that is a matter for you.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that it is astonishing that no record is kept by the Department of Education as to which teachers are trained, and how many? Maybe the Minister could look at that too so that we can identify any gaps across Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lunn: I thank Mrs Overend. I was not aware that there is no record kept, in fact I am a bit surprised by that. Surely a record must be kept in the schools in question, mostly special schools? I have spoken to the people at Harberton School in my area and they think that this service is invaluable. The way in which it is being delivered now is not really open to question.

The motion kind of gives us a bit of a problem. We decided yesterday that we would probably support it, but the more I look at it, the more I wonder what it is that we are supporting. I cannot help thinking that it is an education motion and that, perhaps, Sinn Féin might wish that it had done its homework, because the way it is worded does not add up.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes, certainly.

Mr Agnew: Does the Member agree that it is not about whether we support Middletown, which is a fantastic facility, but it is the proposal to go back to residential provision that is the issue?

Mr Lunn: I am sure that I made the point about the notion that you would go back to the original priorities. The original priorities are to give children who are on the spectrum the very best treatment, assessment and therapy that we can provide. I will wait to hear if anybody can suggest a better way than what Middletown is doing at the moment, except that if you give them 50% more money, Minister, they will do 50% better and probably look after 50% more teachers, children and parents. You probably get the drift of what I think about the motion by now. *[Laughter.]* I will reserve judgement. Possibly, it will not get pushed to a vote; that would probably be the best thing.

Mr Logan: I want to contribute to the debate in a positive manner just as some other Members have, and I agree with most of what Mr Lunn said. The motion is quite negatively framed, but I want to contribute in a positive manner. I praise Middletown on the work that it does which is very valuable to the children — some of whom have very complex forms of autism — and their parents.

I am confident that the Department of Education and the Minister are clearly committed to meeting the needs of children and young people with autism. This manifests itself through a range of different methods, including mainstream provision, learning support centres attached to mainstream schools, and the special schools provision. The Department of Education also provides funding to the Middletown Centre for Autism and has established it and enabled it to expand its programme of direct support and intervention to children with complex autism, who are referred by the Education Authority, and provide professional and parental training and research services. Minister Weir visited the school in August this year, just three months into his appointment, to look around the centre and assure management and staff of his support.

I said earlier that I agree with Mr Lunn's comments. I am disappointed at the tone of the motion. It uses language such as, "deeply concerned", "failure" and "setback for autism services" and this is simply not accurate. It calls for residential assessments and, like others, I agree that this is not necessarily the

best option. The research shows that children are best placed at home with their parents or carers, who have benefited from the centre's training.

It talks about a renewed commitment to the centre's original priorities, which are as follows:

"The Middletown Centre for Autism aims to support the promotion of excellence in the development and coordination of education services to children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders."

That support does not always need to come from residential services. As I said, I believe that that is best placed with parents and carers. After the launch of the Northern Ireland Executive's autism strategy and action plan, the Middletown Centre for Autism, in conjunction with the Education Authority, is delivering training programmes for teachers, education professionals, youth workers and parents, helping to provide effective support for children with autism. Formal arrangements are also in place for collaborative working between the Department of Health and the Department of Education.

The Middletown Centre for Autism is, right now, a fantastic resource and facility for young people. The centre provides an extensive training programme for parents, schools and a range of professionals, offering opportunities to develop knowledge, skills and safe practices for education provision for children and young people with autism. The centre's data shows that, up to April 2016, almost 15,000 parents and 17,000 professionals in the Republic of Ireland and 4,500 parents and almost 20,000 professionals in Northern Ireland attended the centre's training events, which are held in venues across both countries. The latest inspection report, which was referred to, could not be more full of praise for the leadership in the school. Equipping people to deal with autism is a vital and necessary part of allowing individuals with ASD and their carers to get the most out of life. That is what the Middletown Centre for Autism seeks to do.

I am disappointed that the motion is framed negatively. As Lord Morrow rightly said, we will be voting it down today.

Ms J McCann: I thank my colleague Barry McElduff for proposing the motion. We are trying to add to what is happening at Middletown. We are not saying that its direction is wrong or anything else but are just trying to add the residential part of it.

The passing of the Autism Act 2011 was the result of a long campaign. Like me, many other Members were here at the time when individuals, parents and organisations representing people with autism fought long and hard in that campaign to get the Act passed. The Act was followed by the launch of an autism strategy and action plan. For children and adults who have autism or for parents whose children are autistic, it pointed the way towards the provision of improved support and services. Unfortunately, that was not the experience of many of those people.

Someone already mentioned some of the issues in 'Broken Promises', in which Autism NI and the National Autistic Society called for action now to ensure that that better quality of life for autistic people and their families is now delivered. There are a lot of people — I meet them day and daily in my constituency — who still feel that those services and access to them are not properly resourced in the way that they should be. That is particularly true of waiting times for children's assessments. I raised that issue at the Education Committee last week when the Department was in. There are still areas where people are waiting for up to 20 months for a child's assessment. That child cannot receive help in school until the assessment is carried out, which has a major impact on that child's ability to learn and future attainment levels. We really need to look at some of those issues as well.

Statistics show that some children can wait that length of time. Many families find it extremely difficult to cope with the practical and emotional problems that caring for someone with autism brings, and they often feel isolated and overwhelmed. There is a real need for those support services and adequate provision that can be easily accessed in order to help them.

I work with a number of people in my constituency in the Butterfly support group, which is a group of parents of children with autism who came together to support and encourage each other. There are a lot of self-help groups out there that exist on donations and very small amounts of funding. They do activities with children and other parents. We need to look again at helping those groups and resourcing them better.

The Middletown centre, as has already been said, provides intensive assessment and learning support for children and young people with complex autism who experience difficulties in their educational setting. It also provides training to education professionals and parents of children who have autism, alongside different

areas of research and information. People have already mentioned that it is an all-island facility that is jointly funded by the Executive and the Government in the South. The recent evaluation report said that the quality of leadership and management at the centre was outstanding, and that the services provided by the centre had a significant impact on the education and experiences not just of the pupils but of staff and parents.

There is no doubt, and I do not think that anybody is saying that it is not providing an excellent service. The reality is that outreach provision is a much-needed service. Like many here, I can remember people, at the time when this idea was being developed, wanting the services to be kept in local communities and schools that were handy for parents. There was also a small group of people who needed that residential facility — perhaps those who had more complex needs. What we are trying to do is to build and support that.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Ms J McCann: I hope that people see that that is the way the motion is meant to be. It is about the added value of Middletown, and is certainly not a criticism of what is happening there at the moment.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I was a member of the all-party group on autism during the last Assembly term, and now have the privilege of being the chair of the group. During the last number of years, I have gained an insight into how autism affects people and their families, the impact that it has and how overwhelming it can be for individuals and their loved ones. Although we have a broad understanding, the full impact of living with autism can only truly be felt by those who are directly living with the condition.

By definition, each case is completely individual, and no matter what strategy is arrived at, there will be no one-size-fits-all solution to this. In dealing with autism, it is vital that the individual is at the centre of the approach, and people with autism must receive the highest-quality education services, tailored to their individual needs, in order to achieve the best possible outcome. In doing so we will ensure that we are equipping those people with the appropriate life skills that are required to realise their educational achievements, access employment and, of course, fulfil their individual potential.

Northern Ireland has the highest incidence of autism diagnosis in the United Kingdom at 2.3%. The UK average is 1%. With more than double the national average, we in Northern Ireland should be approaching autism in a strategic and long-term manner to future-proof our services and ensure that those already in the system have access to the best possible ways to suitably manage their needs.

The Middletown Centre for Autism was established in 2007, when increasing numbers of children were being educated outside of Northern Ireland due to the severity of their ASD-associated behavioural issues. Since then, around 30 new pupils each year have availed themselves of the centre's excellent facilities and services. With two joint inspection reports noting the exceptional services delivered and the positive outcomes for its users, in school and at home, the work of the centre and its management must be congratulated.

The original model for the centre was intended to be a residential scheme. Over the years, this has developed into being more outreach in nature. My issue with the motion is the focus on the residential element of the centre. As I mentioned at the outset, autism is entirely individual and each case is very different. That said, one of the defining characteristics is the need for routine and the dislike of change. I am concerned that any enforced change of routine may actually be detrimental to the development and progress of people with autism and may, in fact, set back any progress.

I am further concerned that there may be an element of institutionalism with the residential treatment for autism, and I feel that this is not an approach that is necessarily appropriate. My view is that, through engaging with people in their own educational environment and supporting their families and teaching staff, we may be able to achieve better outcomes.

I am conscious that there is a lack of evidence to support the need for, or the implied success of, any proposed residential facility. I am aware that the Minister visited the centre during the summer, and the view among the professionals, parents and children using the facility was that outreach was the preferred option. The reality is that those are the voices that we need to listen to.

11.15 am

In closing, there is no doubt that we can do better in looking at the provision for autism.

Whilst the Middletown model is working well and is achieving results, it is not providing what it was originally designed to do. I therefore believe that the current provision could be reviewed in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for service users. It must be recognised that we must attain good value for money whilst achieving that. We have significant educational, clinical and academic resources to draw on in reviewing the service, not to mention a vast number of voluntary and charity partners, such as Autism NI and the National Autistic Society. The key to reviewing this type of service is listening to those who are benefiting from it and using their experience to shape the future of autism services for Northern Ireland and through joint working with the Republic of Ireland.

The all-party group wishes the Minister of Education every success in his cross-border working with the Minister for Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland. I look forward to seeing the results for the benefit of not only those dealing with autism today but for any future services. Whilst I and my party will not be supporting the motion today, I welcome the recent meetings that the Education Minister, in particular, and, indeed, the Health Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have had with —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Cameron: — Autism NI and members of the APG.

Mrs Barton: Meeting the needs of young people with autism and their families is clearly something that we should all support. In the 14 years since the project at Middletown was announced, and in the five years since the implementation of the Autism Act, the prevalence of autism diagnosis in Northern Ireland has greatly increased but, unfortunately, the percentage of children helped by specialist assessment has declined dramatically.

It is concerning that, in the Programme for Government consultation paper, there appears to be only minimal provision made for special needs. Autism is not mentioned once in the entire draft Programme for Government, and special needs is mentioned only three times in the 200-page document and is never actually referred to in the list of actions. On page 45, it states:

"outcomes for children and young people with special educational needs also require

additional focus if those outcomes are also to improve."

Yet, this is not referenced again under the title, "What will we do?". While the Executive state the obvious problem, I hope that they have the skills and the inclination to take action.

Recently, we debated the partnerships between schools and allied professionals in the health and social care sector. That is also crucial when considering the centre for autism. It must provide a linked-up, integrated service, as addressing health and social care needs equips all children to make the most of educational opportunities.

Many years ago, it was suggested that health visitors be equipped to identify autistic tendencies as early as the two-year assessment as that could enable support to be tailored for children at a very early age. Like most diagnoses, early diagnosis is advantageous in creating positive outcomes. My colleague Sandra Overend already covered the issues that young people with autism face during diagnosis, including increased waiting times as a result of the failure to properly plan for the number of children diagnosed.

Equally stressful, however, can be the other end of the education system where young adults with autism must make the transition to life as a school leaver. Learning does not stop for young people at 19. In a report by the Committee for Employment and Learning, published in 2016, areas of concern documented included a real lack of suitable provision for individuals during the transition stage and the fact that there are problems in the process that hamper a smooth transition, such as the lack of information. One idea that was considered was extending the statement of educational need to the age of 25. However, the report quite rightly stated that the same problem would present at 25. A substantive, tailored approach to special educational needs education must therefore be developed for the whole life of people with autism.

It is important to ensure that the Middletown Centre for Autism has its capacity expanded. That will require serious investment and expansion. Although we support the motion, we must not assume that that is the only way in which to provide autism services. We must continue to work with children, parents, teachers and other bodies to ensure that services for those with autism and related conditions continue to improve. Together with the Middletown centre, that will have significant

benefits for those with the condition and for society as a whole.

Ms Lockhart: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter. Autism, ADHD and Asperger's syndrome are all conditions that we hear about so often. I have sat with mums, dads and carers and have had them literally cry and long for some help and assistance for their children and other young people who present with those needs. The message is very clear: each child is different and each child presents with different needs when diagnosed with autism.

I commend the Minister on his visit to the centre in Middletown to see the facilities there at first hand. It is my intention to visit the centre in the not-too-distant future. Following his visit, I note that the Minister made a very clear statement in which he said that it is clear what a positive impact the services provided by the centre are having on pupils, parents and teachers. Those are the three key stakeholders in the whole debate.

Additional needs facilities and education provision are key focus areas for me in my term in the Assembly. During my time as a councillor, I was lobbied by many families, who contacted me to raise concerns about statementing and diagnosis. In the main, though, they contacted me about early intervention and ensuring that their child gets the best possible intervention at the earliest possible age.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for giving way. I know that she is a member of the all-party group on autism as well. Does she agree with me that the Assembly, on a cross-departmental basis, needs to look at 'Broken Promises', the report published by the two main autism charities? Does she also agree that more needs to be done on a cross-departmental basis to ensure the implementation of the Autism Act?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Lockhart: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Absolutely, and I commend the Member for her role on the all-party group. The title of 'Broken Promises' says it all, and I was very encouraged by the Minister recently meeting the group to ensure its implementation. The Education Committee is a great arena in which to raise those issues, and you are 100% right about the need to ensure a working together by the Department of Health, the Department of Education, the Department for the Economy

and the Department of Justice to help these children and young people realise their full potential.

The motion is too specific and does not address the areas of priority need. Residential has its place, but I do not believe that, on balance, it is a methodology that professionals necessarily believe is best placed to address need. A study has shown that autism affected 2.3% of the school population in 2015-16, which is a rise of 1.1% on the 2009-2010 figures. I suggest that that is down to a better understanding of the symptoms and awareness of the illness. However, that increase obviously means a need for increased provision and finance to deal with it. It is very clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

Previously, additional needs children were potentially labelled as disruptive or, in some instances, slow learners and were often left to their own devices. I am really encouraged by the fact that the Middletown centre is training and really homing in on these young people to try to help them realise their full potential.

I am very encouraged by the training programme that they have in place. I note with admiration the two joint inspection reports that state very clearly that Middletown centre delivers services to an exceptional standard, and that has affected the lives of children in school and at home. My only hesitation is that, as the numbers presenting with the condition increase, it is vital that we resource it in that way. I am not going to rehearse it, but I do not believe that residential is the way to deal with these young people. To take them out of their own surroundings is somewhat wrong, and I do not think that they would be able to cope with it.

It is vital that we listen to parents and ensure that they have feed-in, and I believe that Middletown is doing that in an exceptional way. The real issue with additional needs is not the educational evaluation of the children but the medical assessment times, which are causing unnecessary delays to treatment. I believe that this, alongside some of the Education Authority's processes for dealing with additional needs, is not best placed. I know that the Minister has committed to looking at those processes and ensuring that they are addressed.

The centre provides wide-ranging training programmes for parents and schools. It has also done significant research on sensory processing and has provided advice and guidance and online resources. I support a review of the current operation and educational

offering on an ongoing basis. We can never be complacent or sit back in the belief that we have cracked this. This is a fluid, ever-changing process —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Ms Lockhart: — and I know that the Minister will continue to work to this end.

Mr Durkan: First, I offer apologies from Colin McGrath, our education spokesperson, as he cannot be here for today's debate, and double apologies from him that I have to speak instead of him. While not overly familiar with the situation or, indeed, the history of Middletown — I would like to learn more and would like to see what is happening there — I am all too familiar, as, I am sure, are most of us in the Chamber, with the many challenges facing those with autism and their families every day.

Mrs Overend elaborated most on those challenges and the huge frustrations and difficulties that they cause. Children have to wait a completely unacceptable time for diagnosis, and, sadly, that seems to set the trend for what they can expect from services and statutory service providers for the rest of their lives — not a lot.

It seems to me that the Middletown motion just about typifies service delivery, or lack of it, for people with autism. We have a great vision and the promise of better things to come. I think of the Autism Act, but, ultimately, it does not materialise. Reading into it more and listening to today's debate, it is hard to understand the wisdom or rationale of the motion, given that it seems to fly in the face of what the experts tell us about residential provision. If anything, rather than assist people with autism, the motion almost misleads and manipulates them. I echo Mr Lunn's sentiments that we want to see the centre, and, indeed, all autism services, fully and adequately funded.

It is clear from reading the information pack that what the centre does, it does very well, outstandingly well, in fact, according to an inspection this year. Transdisciplinary support has expanded due to additional staffing, and staff working with pupils, schools and parents have developed their extensive and holistic special skills and are highly valued. That leads to improved outcomes for the pupils at home and at school. Facilities have improved, and investment has been made to upgrade the ICT infrastructure.

With regard to today's debate, though, I am slightly concerned at the tone used by Lord Morrow in relation to North/South cross-border projects. We need to see more North/South collaboration across a wide range of issues. Nowhere is this collaboration more essential than in the area of health, where enhanced relationships between jurisdictions on this island will not just save a lot of money but will save a lot of lives. I would be a bit more concerned about his remarks if they were not at odds with the actions of some of his party colleagues when they were Health Ministers in the not-too-distant past.

11.30 am

We will not be supporting the motion, but we do support those people working in the centre and elsewhere to meet the needs of people and their families who are living with autism. We need to work for them and with them to ensure more funding and better services for autism. While we will be voting with the Minister on this occasion, he cannot ignore that much of what his Department does in relation to autism is not up to scratch.

Ms Armstrong: I declare an interest because I live with autism. Before I came to speak today, I went back to the people who I have been working with for the past year to ask them about their opinion on this. In February this year, my predecessor, Kieran McCarthy, submitted my petition that was signed by over 8,500 people calling for better autism support and services from Health and Education. Health, as we know, said at that stage that there would be an extra £2 million a year and that there would be further recruitment of staff to bring down waiting times. That is happening, and we are very grateful for that. We know that the Education Minister went out to see Middletown. Thank you very much for that. With regard to schools, the report card reads, "Could do better". I say that because we are still waiting to see the support and help for students when they get their diagnosis from Health and go back into the education system.

When I spoke to parents who confirmed that they had access to Middletown services, they could not be more glowing in their praise of Middletown. They were very clear that the help that they received as parents, that their children received and that teachers received in their training was fantastic and second to none. That has been borne out by the many reports that have been provided to us in relation to the motion. Some parents did say to me, "What is Middletown? What is this?". They were not

aware of it. Indeed, there were some teachers who did not know the referral process. When I say that I mark the report card as "Could do better", that is what I mean. There are many people whose children end up having a diagnosis and then wait an extraordinary amount of time for support systems to be put in place in schools.

That is why I support the Middletown approach for the whole-school ASD-competent environment. Middletown can go into schools. It can develop the full school system to ensure that, as others have said, the school environment is more appropriate for children with ASD. We have teachers trained, the parents are given support and the children themselves are given support. The whole school network, whether that is classroom assistants, caretakers or cleaners, is involved in it. This is a more sustainable approach to helping children with ASD in Northern Ireland than residential care. However, I do say that each child is an individual, and, in some cases, residential care is important. For some girls in particular who are not diagnosed until much later, perhaps residential care may suit them. It is not for everyone, and it is not the full solution, but, if we do away with residential services completely, what will we do for those young people who require it? I am bit more cautious than others because I live with autism and I understand, in the family environment, exactly the difficulties that can happen.

I also believe that Middletown should be fully funded to support everybody who is involved in the educational environment. I say that because of my experience. In September, for instance, in my constituency, the Education Authority's transport department had to do a very quick change in transport provision on day one because a taxi firm pulled out. It happened to be that the school and the pupils who were affected by that change were children with autism from Killard special needs school. That change was handled very quickly. There was transport in place so that the children got home, but the change caused such a detrimental effect to the children that one child could not go back to school for a week and the others had meltdowns when they went home. I think that Middletown should be invested in to provide training, not just for teachers and the school estate, but for the Education Authority and for departmental officials because an understanding wholly and completely of the effects that change can have on children with autism would be very welcome by parents so that people could understand exactly the impact that it can have.

My colleague mentioned teacher-training records. I have written to the Minister, and, in the responses that have come back, he has confirmed that the Education Authority or schools will hold training records. On behalf of parents, I ask this: can we please have something better? Can we have a more structured approach to make sure that teachers are afforded the time and the ability to go to appropriate training, perhaps provided by Middletown? Can the Minister look at the cross-departmental autism strategy? The strategy has been extended to 2017, so now is the time to start thinking about the next time. Middletown should absolutely be funded to its full ability, but Middletown, Autism NI, the National Autistic Society, parents and young people themselves should all be talked to about the development of the next cross-departmental autism strategy —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Ms Armstrong: — to see how we can improve services and make sure that funding is fully available.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Steven Agnew, I have to inform the Member that he has only three minutes.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Many issues affect families who have experience of autism: the time it takes to get a diagnosis; support after diagnosis; support in schools; support at home; and wider public awareness. In all my time of working on issues relating to autism and other special educational needs, the issue that the motion seeks to address has not come up. I have not heard anything in today's debate that compels me to believe that this is the pressing issue in autism services.

As many others highlighted — I will not go into too much detail because it has been said — the Middletown centre does excellent work. What I have not heard is evidence that it somehow needs to go back to an original purpose. I am not entirely sure why it has evolved in the way that it has; maybe the Minister will talk to that. It seems to me to be in line with current thinking across a range of health issues, which is that we do more outreach, more work in communities and go out to families rather than take this residential approach, although I am minded of Kellie Armstrong's comments, which seem to give some credit to that approach. However, at a time when, across our health estate, we are looking to move more towards community-based services, this seems to move

in the opposite direction. In the absence of evidence that that is what is required, I cannot support the thrust of the motion. As I say, there are so many areas where we need to put increased investment into autism services, including putting more resources into Middletown. However, I cannot support the thrust and direction of the motion. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how he intends not only to support the Middletown centre further but to improve autism services more generally.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, to respond to the debate. The Minister has up to 15 minutes.

Mr Weir: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am getting indications that I do not have to take the full 15 minutes, but we shall see how it goes.

I thank all the Members who took part in the debate, which was very constructive. I even find myself in the rare situation of agreeing with Steven Agnew, which does not happen all that often. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the work at Middletown. While I disagree with the motion and will, therefore, vote against it if it is moved, I appreciate that the motivation behind it is very genuine and sincere in trying to focus on the particular way forward for Middletown.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the debate on a motion dealing very directly and specifically with the Middletown centre quite often diverged into wider issues around autism; that is quite understandable. I will deal with a couple of the points. Both the visit to Middletown and the recent meeting with representatives of the all-party group on autism and Autism NI have been mentioned. The proposer also mentioned 'Broken Promises'. As a Department, we are trying to deliver on those, particularly through teacher training, which was mentioned and is one of the key aspects of Middletown.

There has been a great deal of criticism, particularly of the diagnostic side of things. Delivery for probably the majority of 'Broken Promises' lies with the Department of Health, which leads on autism, but I am very encouraged by the level of engagement across the Executive with Autism NI and the National Autistic Society NI. It has not been just me. I know that the Health Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have recently met representatives of those organisations. There is a determination to try to resolve the issues. As we move through the mandate, we will be contributing to the ongoing autism strategy, the lead for which again lies with another Department.

One of the things that has united the House in its approach is the fairly consistent welcoming of the good work and progress that is being made by the Middletown Centre for Autism, and by my Department and the Department of Education and Skills in the Republic of Ireland, as they work together to promote excellence in the development and delivery of education services for children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders. The increased number of pupils, parents and professionals who have benefited from the centre's services is evidence of the fact that the centre has become an important part of the specialist second-tier services available to support children in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, the success of that is borne out by the various inspection reports.

The motion goes very much to the heart of the delivery of the model that will be provided. The centre's current service model has three elements to it. First, it has an intensive one-to-one multidisciplinary assessment and support outreach service for pupils with the most complex autism needs. Secondly, it has a training and advisory service that provides training to education professionals and parents. Mention has been made of the Education Authority records. We will be pressing it on better ways in which those training records can be provided. Thirdly, it has a research and information service that requires the most up-to-date information, techniques and best practice to be used. To date, the centre has provided training to over 62,000 parents and education professionals in the Republic and Northern Ireland. If there is a case for some officials having a wider scope, I am sure that that can be looked at.

May I correct one thing that the proposer said? I have not been able to find any record of where I said that I believe that residential is a better way forward or, indeed, that it should be part of the way forward. What has been acknowledged, I think, by the centre is that residential would be of some value to a small number of children, but it has also said that the current outreach intervention work is having a much more immediate and prolonged impact, not only on children and young people with autism who are referred but on their families, on school staff and on pupils.

I was going to deal with the point that was raised by the SDLP, but its members seem to have left the Chamber. I will maybe come back to that. I am grateful to see that Mark has returned. Mr Durkan asked why there was the shift. There were two reasons for it. The less beneficial one was the fact that the level of

finance that was proposed, particularly from the Republic of Ireland, decreased. It was not able to be provided. That meant a certain rejigging of the model. However, the virtuous element of that is that the rejigging followed best practice and has turned out to be the better route.

Since October 2010, the centre has provided assessment and support to children through its outreach service. The wider impact means that other children with autism, not just those who are referred, receive support, either as part of the referred child's class or via teacher training. To date, it is estimated that that has impacted on around 3,000 children and young people.

As Members will be aware, two joint inspections have taken place, in April 2012 and April 2016. The idea of review may therefore be a little premature at this stage. Both inspections evaluated the provision of services as outstanding. The most recent inspection highlighted the fact that the services impacted significantly on the education and life experiences of referred pupils, their teachers and their parents. Key strengths highlighted in the evaluation relate to the multidisciplinary nature of the outreach service and the extent and duration of the centre's involvement in pupils' home and school simultaneously. The quality of leadership and management was also described as being outstanding.

11.45 am

It is unfortunate that the proposers of the motion appear to have missed those positive reports and focused instead on the lack of residential assessment, perceiving that to be a setback to autism services. I do not believe that that is the case. We are all aware of the background; I have dealt with it. The outreach service is fundamentally the same assessment and support service for children with autism as was originally intended. It provides the assessment, therapies and education plan to meet the individual needs of the child. However, significantly, it is delivered in the child's home and school setting for up to three school terms, instead of residentially at the Middletown centre. In fact, the service is having a wide-ranging positive impact not just on the referred pupils but on teachers, parents, siblings and other members of the family and, indeed, other children with autism who attend that child's school. It is difficult to see that outstanding provision as a setback for autism, considering that those wider-reaching impacts would never have been achieved if we had simply gone down the residential route.

At a recent visit to the centre in August, I spoke to the parents of a child who had been referred to Middletown. They explained that they were initially very apprehensive about the offer of support from Middletown, as they thought that their child would have to attend the centre on a residential basis. They did not feel that it would be in the best interests of the child to attend on that basis, as it would take the child away from family and family surroundings. However, they told me that the intensive outreach intervention programme that was provided in their home and in their child's school made all the difference to their lives. They described it as "life-changing", and they were very emotional in their praise of Middletown staff. A number of other parents took a similar position.

The centre's staff has advised me that, while a residential facility might assist a small number of children, the centre's current approach has a much more prolonged impact, as the outreach model allows all those young people to be a part of the young person's life. Therefore, it has a much greater impact.

Looking back at the original rationale for Middletown, it was based on the need to:

"address the increasing prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders; recognise good practice and support; and complement current services."

The result was the joint government approach and policy decision to establish Middletown Centre for Autism to provide a specialist second-level autism support service. I think that the centre is delivering on the original concept and is having a wider-reaching and more positive impact with the outreach learning, support and assessment service.

I also highlight that the centre has been developing its services by assisting whole schools to develop their capacity to support pupils with autism, working in the referred schools to bring about a culture change and increasing the school's confidence and capacity to respond to the needs of learners with autism. One intervention creates positive ripples on the pond. Investment in online training is also ongoing to provide easier access to those who are unable to attend events, such as the refreshers and updates for those who have already received training.

Much has been made of the financial situation, and I appreciate that, as an Executive, we need to see what more we can do on autism. Take Mr Lunn's point — he suddenly pays attention at this point. He spoke of what we could do if,

for example, there was a 50% increase in funding. However, if we were to move to an additional residential model and do it properly, we would have to treble the budget. At the moment, if someone gave me 50% more money for Middletown, I would look to expand the outreach services, because that is the greatest need.

Mrs Armstrong said that there were still parents who were unaware of Middletown, and we must reach out to those people. I appreciate that you can always do certain things that are to the benefit of very small groups of children, but, to reach the maximum number of children, any additional resources should mostly be directed to outreach because that is the best bit. That is why I oppose the motion. I oppose it not simply because of that conviction but from discussions with the staff and the board when I was in Middletown. At that point, we were waiting for the appointments from the Republic of Ireland; we had made the Northern Ireland appointments. However, from speaking to the person who was, I think, about to be the chair of the board and to parents, children and Autism NI during my recent visit, I see that there is a clear direction of travel that says the route to go is outreach and increased levels of outreach rather than residential. That is the danger with that.

As we move forward, it is important to ensure that the services delivered reflect best practice. That is why the centre continues to use the latest research, including the findings from its intensive intervention service, to support future training. The new board of directors will consider the future direction of services as part of the centre's business planning process. If the new directors decide on a different emphasis, I will take their professional judgement and move in that direction, but, as things stand, the focus has got to be on outreach. If there is significant change, that is likely to have a price tag attached, and we have to ensure that we get the best delivery for that.

I am happy to work, as and when required, with Executive colleagues, the centre, its board of directors and the Department of Education and Skills on the services provided by the centre. All of us have a role in enhancing educational achievement and providing the best pathways, particularly for those with special educational needs such as autism. Importantly for Middletown, we need to continue to focus on developing effective child-centred services based on best practice, so I reject the analysis that the failure to provide residential provision at Middletown represents a setback for autism services: it does not. That flies in the face of

the independent inspection reports and the views expressed to me by all stakeholders. I do not see it as being a setback, and I believe that the best way forward is to continue on the route we have been on. That is why, with all sincerity, I have to oppose the motion and ask whether, in light of what has been said, the supporters of the motion want to carry on with it or whether the fact that we have had the debate has, at least, been able to unearth a degree of light.

Mr Speaker: I call Ms Jennifer McCann — sorry, Ms Catherine Seeley to wind up the debate on the motion, and the Member has up to 10 minutes.

Ms Seeley: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. It was a positive debate. I thank the Minister for being here. I want to say from the outset that the motion was not intended to attack or critique the work of the Minister; it was really just to call for reassurances that he is committed to supporting children with autism, the families of children with autism and the teachers of children with autism despite the recent decision around residential provision at the Middletown Centre for Autism, which, as my party colleague Barry McElduff rightly said, has been abandoned. I think that the Minister, in his contributions, has given those assurances, and I welcome that. I want to echo the praise for the centre that my party colleague Jennifer mentioned.

In response to a question for written answer, the Minister gave assurances that assessments and therapies, although not being carried out on-site at the Middletown Centre for Autism, were being delivered in the child's home, school or community. I have spoken with staff at the centre, and they are content with that. However, what has caused concern is the suggestion that that decision signified a lesser commitment to services for children with autism and, indeed, their families.

In a response to a question for written answer from Mr McNulty and Mr Durkan's party leader, the centre advised that a residential facility would be of value to a small number of children. That is what we are calling for. I welcome the comments from Kellie Armstrong. I thank her for sharing her personal experience of autism, which contributed well to the debate.

The Middletown Centre for Autism supports the promotion of excellence in the development and coordination of education services to young people with ASD. It is an area of cross-border cooperation, hence it is located near the border,

which Lord Morrow, my colleague on the Education Committee, queried. It is not simply used by residents in the South; it is equally funded by them.

Between 2002 and 2012, the Executive contributed approximately £6 million to developing the centre, which was a much needed resource at the time. In addition to assessments and therapies, the centre aims to upskill teachers at a time when autism training is not mandatory, which is something that, I hope, the Minister will reconsider during his term. Whilst the residential aspect has not been realised, it is important to note that this is not a case of either/or; we need both levels of provision to work hand in hand. I also accept Mrs Barton's comments that this is not the only way that we need to address autism and agree with her comments on autism services for older people and those who are outside the education setting.

A transdisciplinary team currently works with identified children to understand their needs in their school and home settings. That provides training and techniques for teachers, parents and siblings as well as awareness and understanding for the children's peers. That has to be welcomed, and we do not deny that at all. That said, the extent of the outreach is limited by resource and is not consistent across the North. For that reason, I ask the Minister to commit to extending the work of the transdisciplinary teams as well. Mrs Overend detailed the number of children awaiting a diagnosis, which could be addressed by expanding and further resourcing the team and, indeed, the centre.

I have spoken to staff in the centre, who believe that there is a need to expand in order to provide services to the increasing number of children with ASD. At the beginning of this week, they expressed directly to me a desire to have some level of residential provision to offer respite to parents and carers, particularly the parents and carers of multiple children with learning and/or physical disabilities. Whilst Mr McNulty is right in his commentary on the success of the current outworkings, with a renewed commitment and additional resource, children could benefit further, as Mr Lunn said. Therefore, I call on the Minister — I know that he recently visited the centre, for which the staff were very grateful — to re-engage meaningfully with centre staff and centre users to gain a fuller understanding of the need, with a view to ensuring that all children are supported to reach their full potential, irrespective of their disability.

I welcome the tone of the debate around the Chamber. It is not our intention to divide. We wanted to have a fruitful debate on autism services, and I think that we have had that. We wanted to raise awareness and seek reassurances from the Minister that he is committed —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way and for her comments. When I was at Middletown, I had the opportunity to speak to the incoming chair of the group. At that stage, there had been a delay. Some of the appointments to the board come from my Department, and some come from the Department in the Republic of Ireland. At that stage, we had made the appointments and the Republic had not. Subsequent to that visit, Minister Bruton from the Republic's Government made those appointments. That means that we now have a full board. I will be happy to have ongoing engagement — that is probably the best route — with the board as we move ahead, because it is obviously in the best position to make a judgement on that. I am happy to give that assurance.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister: indeed, he has given multiple assurances this morning that have to be welcomed. When I spoke to the centre, I found that that is exactly what they want. They want to re-engage the Minister and the Department with a view to ensuring that there is a small level of residential provision and that access to respite is available. In my conversation with staff, they really focused on the need to extend and expand their services so that they work with more teachers, carers and parents of children with autism. We welcome the tone of the debate on all sides of the House this morning and the commitment and reassurances from the Minister. We now feel much more positive that the Minister will extend, expand and resource services for those children, the families of those children and the teachers of children with autism.

Mr McElduff: Will the Member give way?

Ms Seeley: I will give way.

Mr McElduff: This is just to serve notice that our party is of a mind to withdraw the motion, if the facility is open to us, given that there has been a very full debate on the value of the Middletown centre and a recognition that the Minister and the Department are moving in the right direction. Of course, we reserve the right to hold our position regarding the value of a residential facility as well.

12.00 noon

Ms Seeley: I thank the Member for giving way. I urge — *[Laughter.]* I thank the Member for his contribution. Apologies: it was me speaking.

We do not want to divide on the issue. That would not send out a positive message to the centre or to teachers, parents and carers of children with autism. I hope that we can move forward on the issue, with consensus right across the House.

Mr Speaker: The Member has sought leave to withdraw the motion in the Order Paper standing in the names of Mr Barry McElduff, Ms Catherine Seeley and Ms Jennifer McCann. If there are no objections, the motion will be withdrawn.

Motion, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease.

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

Nurture Provision

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List, so 15 minutes have been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to wind. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to wind. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, the House should note that the amendments are mutually exclusive. If amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2.

Lord Morrow: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the report by the Centre for Evidence and Social Innovation at Queen's University Belfast, entitled 'The Impact and Cost Effectiveness of Nurture Groups in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland'; welcomes the commitment of the Minister of Education to continuing to fund the 32 nurture units across Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Education to examine potential options to mainstream nurture provision within the current education budget.

This Assembly is supposed to be based on the core principle of inclusion. It should reach out to the citizens of Northern Ireland, particularly those who are marginalised for a variety of reasons, including social, emotional, financial and educational issues. We have to use our energy, efforts and resources to ensure that all are included in the rich and varied fabric of our society. We have to remove any barriers to learning that may exist in our schools to ensure that all children are valued equally and given the opportunity to achieve their potential and contribute to our community.

I commend the staff of Queen's University for producing such an excellent report on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of nurture group provision in Northern Ireland. It would be difficult not to recommend funding for the implementation of nurture groups when one reads the report in detail and takes account of the views of those involved in the study. The challenge surely is that we have to search for funding from a variety of sources to provide the necessary funds to implement the nurture provision.

In addition to reading the report, I took account of the views of teachers and others involved in providing and managing a nurture room in a school. Short-term expenditure of approximately £50,000 per school — for a teacher, classroom assistant and resources, that is — at an early stage to maximise on early intervention will yield dividends later while the child is at school and, in some cases, post-education at 16 years of age. The cost-effective figures are included in the report and merit careful consideration and study. Long-term savings on a child with a conduct disorder can range from £12,000 to £150,000 later in life. A stitch in time not only saves public funds but gives a child and family hope for the future. I feel that the real test of any provision is, of course, the views of those who are tasked with using it, those who implement it and those who benefit from it.

The following is a brief summary of comments from teachers involved in a nurture room:

"Our entire school has benefited greatly from the nurture room — we can see improved attendance and confidence amongst the children;

Children who return from the nurture room to their class full time are more settled to learn and can cope better with class work;

There are better relationships between the nurture children and their peers;

Children in the nurture room have more time to work their emotions in a small group and work at their own pace, and are then equipped to use these strategies when they return to class;

As a school, there has been a significant strengthening of relationships between staff and parents, especially those parents who might have initially been reluctant to approach staff;

The nurture approach has been fully embraced by the entire school community — children are accepted at their level of understanding and development;

Staff take a flexible approach to dealing with behaviour — they look at the needs of the child rather than react;

The school works to build up the confidence of parents, encourage them and reassure them that they are doing all they can;

The nurture room itself is accessible to all children and can be used for children who are having trouble settling in the mornings or who just need a quiet space for a time;

Older children would benefit from the nurture room and should be included;

The nurture room intervention also has reduced the amount of referrals made to the behavioural team;

The nurture room's small group settings also help staff to more closely identify the children's needs; emotional, educational and social."

Those are quotations from some principals and schools that we have taken into consideration. I think that everyone will agree that they are all exceptionally positive and send out a good message. Those who work at the coalface, as the saying is, see the direct benefits and how it benefits the school, the child and, indeed, the parents. Consider the impact and benefits that a nurture room could have on children with emotional and social problems who may be disruptive and upsetting for the entire class, with the additional work and stress placed on teachers and the worry and anxiety of parents at the prospect of their child being suspended from school.

I commend the report to the Assembly and recommend that funds be found from a variety of sources to mainstream nurture provision in schools. The benefits are clearly outlined in the

report. It is essential that we, the Members of the Assembly, do all that we can to include all the children who may be marginalised. The report should be commended; it should be read by all Members of the Assembly. I believe that they will come to the same conclusion as those of us who tabled the motion: it is work well done, and it augurs well for directing, assisting and helping with nurture provision in schools in the future.

Mr Agnew: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after the second "Northern Ireland;" and insert

"recognises the role effective early years interventions can play in reducing the need for nurture units; and calls on the Minister of Education to examine potential options to develop universal early years education provision."

I am fully supportive of the motion; my amendment seeks to complement it rather than in any way detract from its intention. Just yesterday, DUP councillor Peter Martin, a North Down colleague of mine, spoke in the 'News Letter' about the importance of early years. He highlighted the benefits that something as simple as reading to a two-year-old child can have if done on a regular basis. I hope that we can agree on the steps that need to be taken, even if there is slightly different wording across the motion and the two amendments.

The intent of my amendment is to say that, before we expand the ground floor, we have to get the foundations right. The Queen's University report is clear: nurture units work. They are effective and are an important part of the work that we do with children. However, the reality is that we have limited resources. We know that investment in early years will, on the one hand, enhance the work of nurture units but may also, if done effectively, reduce the need for them. For me, it is more about where we start. I think that we can potentially agree on where we finish. It is more about starting earlier and making that earlier intervention.

As my colleague Clare Bailey put it when we were discussing the motion, we should get children ready for school before they start school rather than, as we sometimes do, trying to help them to catch up when they start school behind their peers. We should, as much as possible, ensure that no child starts school before they are ready. Whilst it is another debate for another day, flexible school starting

age could contribute to the issues that we are trying to address today.

As well as the Queen's University report on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of nurture units, we have ample evidence of the benefits of early years provision. Professor Heckman highlighted the pure economics of early years intervention: £1 spent in early years can save up to £9 in later interventions. I come back to the point that I made earlier: investment in early years has the potential to reduce the need for nurture provision, although it will not negate it entirely.

Dr Suzanne Zeedyk has highlighted in her research the importance of the brain development of a child in those early years, particularly from nought to three. Her work shows the harm done by not intervening in those early years. The disadvantage that can be caused through a lack of proper stimulation, love and care in early years can be very difficult to reverse later. Again, it is a question of getting it right at the early stages rather than trying to undo any harm that has already taken place.

It is unclear from the motion — I look forward to hearing from others — what we mean by "mainstreaming". Do we mean nurture units in every school? Are we talking about a universal service in that regard? If I make that assumption —

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Certainly.

Mr Weir: I think that we all want to see an expansion. I appreciate that there may be a bit of difference in terms of the wording of amendments etc.

Nurture units are funded under a particular programme that is time-limited and separate from the main education budget. When we talk about "mainstreaming", we mean taking that into the main education budget and having something permanent.

12.15 pm

Mr Agnew: I appreciate the Minister's intervention, which is constructive and certainly helps me in my thinking. It is about getting the right services in the right places. The security that mainstreaming would give to nurture units is welcome.

With regard to the evidence, Professor Heckman and Suzanne Zeedyk have both spoken at Stormont, and a number of Members attended. I note that Simon Hamilton, through Assembly questions, raised the importance of early investment with the former Education Minister. When Roy Beggs was chair of the all-party group on children and young people, he was a great champion of early years investment.

We often put a lot of focus on our schools, which are a vital part of a child's life and, to a large extent, help to shape their future development. Sometimes, however, we put too much emphasis on what schools can do. They are somehow required to do everything, and we almost forget about the child outside the school. Early years is not just about supporting educational development but about supporting the child in the context of the family and the family in the context of the community.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that children often find themselves in nurture units because the family unit has broken down in some way or they are not getting adequate provision outside the school setting and that, to all intents and purposes, the school setting is one of the better places to give security to those children?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member and partially agree that that is often where the problems arise. It emphasises my point about needing to work with families and communities. If we work with a child in school, we put the onus on that child to go back to potentially difficult family circumstances, almost to hold their hand. In supporting the family, we support the child, which is why my amendment specifically asks for universal early years services. The evidence is that we try to target families in particular need, which can add stigma and a reluctance to engage. If we have universal services, families can opt out rather than having to opt in. The evidence across Scandinavia is that universal service means that children do not fall through the gaps to the same extent, and Scotland is adopting that model. As I said, families who do not need the support can opt out rather than always trying to get families who need the support to opt in.

This is, of course, an issue for Health and Education, and the Minister is well aware of his duty to work with other Ministers. We are discussing education today, but I ask the Minister to remember that, whilst his title is Minister of Education, he is, effectively, the Minister for children with responsibility for the childcare strategy. It is about looking at

children not just in our school systems but in our community and throughout their early years before they even have contact with the formal education system.

I welcome the debate and the focus that it brings to tackling educational underachievement. I hope that we can agree not only on the end point but on some of the starting points that we need. I will say it again: if we invest in the family, we invest in the child, and we need to look at the child as part of a family unit.

Mr McGrath: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after the second "Northern Ireland;" and insert

"and, as recommended in the report by Queen's University, calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that a sustainable funding model is put in place for the longer-term viability of nurture group provision, to plan the further expansion of nurture provision in each primary school sector targeted in the areas of greatest need, to develop appropriate training for staff and to conduct research into models for the delivery of nurture provision."

I hope that we receive cross-party support for our amendment. I will speak to our amendment in a moment, but, first, I want to say that I am glad that we are getting the opportunity to discuss the motion. It is primarily based on the Queen's University report on nurture group provision, which, I have to say, makes for very positive reading. I welcome the fact that we are today taking the opportunity in the Chamber to discuss an issue not only that we all support but that research has proven is working for our children.

The report highlights the positive impact that nurture provision has had on our children:

"They represent a short-term and focused intervention to address barriers to learning arising from unmet attachment needs."

I welcome the fact that we have this option for children who have difficulties coping in mainstream classes. Although there are only 32 nurture groups in schools across Northern Ireland, there is no denying their success. They are a prime example of how early intervention works and how outcomes for our children are improved. The study found that nurture groups led to significant improvements in social, emotional and behavioural outcomes among

children who previously had difficulty learning in a mainstream class.

I welcome the comments that the Minister has made previously on nurture groups:

"One of the clear indications is that intervention has been of tremendous value to children, particularly to some vulnerable children and those who need that degree of help." — [Official Report (Hansard), 27 September 2016, p32, col 2].

The Minister is right on the money there, but it should also be highlighted that the value of nurture provision goes further, as the report tells us:

"Nurture support is not limited to the nurture group, as all schools will embed the nurturing principles and practice at a whole school level, providing appropriate support for all pupils attending the school."

There are repercussions from having those units in schools, and they spread around the whole school environment, providing a cascading effect of the benefit.

I also welcome the findings in the report that state that nurture groups are cost-effective, costing around £70,000 per school, and have the potential to result in significant savings further down the education system. Let us not ignore the correlation between underachievement and other elements of society further down the line. A small investment at school age could provide a greater saving to society many years later.

Our amendment has two strands. The first part comes directly from recommendation 10 in the Queen's University report:

"The importance of providing a consistent funding framework to ensure that schools are able to develop Nurture Group provision and plan effectively."

The motion mentions the need:

"to examine potential options to mainstream nurture provision within the current education budget."

We believe that the funding model for nurture units should be sustainable to ensure their long-term viability. We have seen the benefits that nurture units have given to us, but they currently cover only 32 schools. We want to see it widened, and the only way in which we

feel that that can be done is to ensure that a sustainable funding model is put in place.

The second part of our amendment calls on the Minister to:

"plan the further expansion of nurture provision in each primary school sector".

We have seen and heard examples of funding not being given to certain sectors. For example, when he was Minister, Mr O'Dowd announced funding for a pilot for nurture units for schools in the Irish-medium sector, and Minister Weir then said that, owing to funding pressures, he could not provide funding for that pilot. The Queen's report recommends:

"Until further research is available on the effectiveness of different models of delivery, it would be wise for the Department of Education to continue to target the provision of Nurture Groups in schools in the most deprived areas".

That should be done regardless of the sector that it is in. I speak —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. I put it on record that there were indications given at that stage that there was additional funding provided by the Department of Finance. Those schools are funded as part of that, so it crosses the various sectors.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his intervention. What we are talking about here is the planned intervention across all sectors. When it becomes reactionary because of budgetary pressures, we must not rob money from particular sectors but keep it right across.

I wholeheartedly agree with the recommendation from Queen's that research should be undertaken to ensure that there are models for the delivery of nurture provision, but until that is done we believe that it should be targeted at the areas of greatest need. If we do not give our children the best start in life, we do them an enormous disservice. What is great about the motion is that it extends to children who need help the most the opportunity to avail themselves of services that will aid their education. The Assembly should be about delivering for children in Northern Ireland and giving them a better start in life. I commend our amendment, the other amendment, and the motion so that our children can be given a start in this process.

Ms J McCann: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this important debate. It is the second education debate today, and it is very good to see, given the contributions so far, that the motions seem to be almost knitting together. We support the motion, and we have no difficulty with either amendment.

Nurture units are of great benefit to young children when they are going through a difficult period, for whatever reason, in their young lives and need a wee bit of extra help and support. I remember my first visit 10 years ago to a nurture unit in my constituency. The setting surprised me because it was very similar to a home environment. The children at that unit received one-to-one help from teachers, classroom assistants and other staff. For me, it was clear that they were not just getting help in going back to the classroom but were also being helped to go back to the family home, which was very important. A lot of parents said very positive things about it. At that time, not too many schools had nurture units. I am glad to see that, through the Delivering Social Change signature projects and other sources of funding, there are now 32 units throughout the North. I hope that, as the motion says, that provision can be mainstreamed in future.

Everybody has to commend the great work that the staff and teachers do with the young children in the units. Talking to teachers and staff, I know that our children often have to face really big challenges in their lives that no child should have to face. Those challenges can have an impact on their emotional well-being and can affect their personal development and, of course, their education. That is what these nurture units are intended to do: give children a bit of support and help to go back to the classroom.

The time taken by teachers and staff to help a vulnerable child through a difficult period with one-to-one support not only helps the child but can also be beneficial for parents and the whole family setting. I have spoken to people whose young children have attended a nurture unit after losing a mother or a father in tragic circumstances and they have told me that the whole family unit has been helped. Maybe they have had brothers or sisters at the same school, and the unit has been beneficial for those children to sit in that home environment to try to come to terms with the great sense of loss that they have had and then go back to the family home to help the remaining parent. While we might view it here mainly in an educational capacity, there is a wider benefit when those children go back into the family home.

Early intervention programmes, such as the services provided by nurture units, are known to work and all the evidence points to them working. Other Members mentioned the evaluation carried out by Queen's University that provided clear evidence of their benefits. It also highlights the difference between children who have received support compared with those who have not because the support was not available in their school. The report goes on to say that nurture groups were very cost-effective; we know that and we have all seen it. We have taken part in debates, but we have seen with our own eyes that early intervention programmes save Departments money in the longer term. When you invest early, particularly in young children and in supporting families, you will see long-term benefits over the years in education, health, social and family issues.

12.30 pm

Over the years, we have had many debates in the Chamber in which it was very clear that intervening early in a child's life, when a vulnerability or difficulty is identified, can have a long-term impact on their lifetime opportunities. Nurture groups provide a short-term and focused intervention for children experiencing difficulties in the class for a number of reasons. They also provide that link, as I said, between home life and school which helps children settle into class again.

Children, particularly those from deprived communities or from a family with social and emotional difficulties or, indeed, financial difficulties —

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

Ms J McCann: — are the ones who will benefit quite a lot from these nurture provisions. I support the motion.

Mrs Overend: I thank the proposers of the motion for bringing it to the Floor of the House. As Ulster Unionist education spokesperson, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in the debate.

Nurture units have become a widespread feature of education provision across the UK, with an estimated 1,500 currently in operation. This is a targeted programme, as Members have already said, aimed at pupils who, for a variety of reasons, have difficulties in mainstream classes, fail to engage in the learning process and may otherwise be at risk of underachievement.

Early intervention is always the most valuable and as nurture units usually target pupils in Key Stage 1 they have an impact at an early stage of a child's development. They take pupils out of their mainstream class setting, usually for between two and four terms, and then return them to their mainstream class on a full-time basis.

The primary aim of nurture groups in Northern Ireland has been to improve the social, emotional and behavioural skills of children from deprived areas who are exhibiting significant difficulties. The evaluation by Queen's University Belfast found that nurture group provision was highly successful in meeting this aim. It is always great to hear that investment in our children is actually having an impact, and that it is not something to be taken lightly.

As with all things, there is, of course, a price tag for nurture groups and, under the current framework, that sits at around £70,000 per school involved. However, the cost-effectiveness of the nurture provision programmes is well documented in the report, and shows the real value that can be placed on early intervention, not just in monetary terms but in the life of the child and their progression through primary education into post-primary schools and beyond. Teachers saw improvements in punctuality, increased attendance and significant reductions in social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Children felt more involved in their classes and were beginning to find school more enjoyable.

While nurture groups are widespread in the UK, they are still in their infancy and there are still aspects of the scheme that could be improved. For example, some evidence showed that greater progress was being made by those who were not eligible for free school meals than by those who were. It would be interesting to understand why that was the case. The original criterion for the allocation of signature project funding targeted schools with an above-average proportion of pupils who were eligible for free school meals. It would be a concern if those children were less likely to receive the benefits of the project. Perhaps adaptations can be made to ensure maximum effect in the future, and I urge the Education Minister to consider further research in that area.

A new nurture room is being officially opened this Friday in Castledawson Primary School, which is in my constituency of Mid Ulster. It received no additional funding from the Department of Education, but the principal and board of governors there obviously felt the need

to invest in teacher training for such a part-time provision at their school. It is available to children on Mondays and Fridays and its aim is to support the social, emotional and behavioural aspect of children in need from P3 to P5. They can aim the provision to where it is most needed and for as long as necessary. This flexibility works for Castledawson Primary School, and it is receiving very positive feedback.

There were limits to the research carried out by Queen's University Belfast, and it recommended further research involving a proper randomised control trial design and further research with a larger sample size into the effects of the different models of provision.

The evaluation report from the Education and Training Inspectorate, published in February this year, also had additional recommendations for improvement, many of which could be explored.

For those reasons, we will support the SDLP amendment, as I do not believe that nurture groups as currently delivered could be described as a finished product, although I do not want to use a consumerism term. I believe, therefore, that the SDLP amendment provides a better way forward and can allow for mainstreaming once a clearer way forward has been established. I highly commend the amendment tabled by Steven Agnew MLA, and I thank him for it. However, I urge him to bring forward the amendment as a motion in its own right, and we could maybe support it at that stage.

In my opinion, the mainstreaming of nurture units and examining the potential of universal early years education provision are not mutually exclusive; indeed, a combination of both would provide a comprehensive support system to children across the UK. For now, I feel that —

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

Mrs Overend: I will, indeed.

I feel that sticking to the issue of nurture units would be wiser. Therefore, we will vote against amendment No 1.

Mr Lyttle: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of nurture units. The short-term, focused intervention for children with particular social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in small groups of six to 10 children, usually from years

1 to 3, led by a teacher and classroom assistant across around 32 schools in Northern Ireland is having a positive impact on pupils, staff and parents and, of course, across the wider school community.

The Queen's University evaluation report has identified a 57% reduction in the number of children exhibiting behavioural challenges when placed in a nurture unit compared with the normal school setting. Pupils are feeling more confident in school and are reporting as enjoying school much more as a result of the nurture units. Also, in cases of children with special educational needs, one in five participating in a nurture unit showed particular improvement.

The Queen's report has found that nurture units are not only beneficial for children but cost-effective. It has found that it will cost at least twice as much to provide a pupil with behavioural difficulties with just one of the many additional resources available between years 3 to 12 as it would to address those needs through early intervention nurture unit provision in years 1 to 3. The costs for the family and educational and social services are significant, and they can be mitigated by that intervention.

There are, however, some issues raised by the Queen's evaluation report that, I believe, are a good reason to support the call for further research into the area. Whilst children participating in nurture units reported increased confidence in school and reduced behavioural challenges, the findings were not the same for an immediate improvement in numeracy and literacy skills. The Queen's report suggests, however, that it should be possible, with further research, to identify improvements in academic attainment in the medium to long term for pupils who have benefited from nurture units and achieved greater confidence and enjoyment in school. I, therefore, support the call for further research into the sustained impact on attendance and academic attainment as well as addressing behavioural challenges.

The report also recommends that nurture unit provision be targeted in the most deprived areas, and that appears to be a main thrust of the SDLP amendment. However, the ETI evaluation on nurture units takes a different view, calling for the roll-out of nurture units beyond areas of social and economic disadvantage and noting that nurturing needs are increasingly evident in all schools. I think that there is merit in the wider SDLP amendment, so we will not vote against it today. However, the Alliance Party believes that, in the context of scarce resource, nurture unit

provision should be a targeted intervention for the pupil and child most in need of nurture support.

We also believe that nurture units must be part of a wider model of early intervention. The Green Party amendment rightly identifies the need for that approach; indeed, research clearly suggests that, as early as the age of two, there can be as much as a six-month gap in language-processing skills between children from advantaged backgrounds and those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The ETI chief inspector's report published in 2014 identified the importance of investment in early years health, childcare and education in supporting school readiness and achievement among our children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

I am content to support the motion. I have no difficulty with either amendment. There is merit in all the content that has been put forward and, indeed, the contributions. I suggest, however, that it would be good to hear —

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

Mr Lyttle: — from the Minister about from where in the education budget the resources will be taken to make the further investments.

Mr Logan: It is a privilege for me to highlight my support for nurture units. As has been said, they provide a short-term, focused intervention for children with particular social, emotional and behavioural difficulties that create barriers to learning in mainstream classes. It is a targeted programme aimed at pupils who fail to engage in the learning process and may otherwise be at risk of underachievement, leading to SEN support or the need for education outside of the school setting.

Analysis of the data gathered on the 529 children who had previously attended nurture groups showed that, on average, they had made consistently large improvements in social, emotional and behavioural development. Just a few weeks ago, I asked the Minister in an Assembly question to give me his assessment of the Queen's University nurture unit evaluation report, and I was delighted to hear that one of the clear indicators is that intervention has been of tremendous value to children, particularly to some children who are vulnerable and those who need that help.

Another thing that came across clearly from the report was that, even though only a limited

number of children are directly involved in a unit, intervention through nurture units in schools creates a whole-school improvement, and children across the board get that. That is why, ideally, we should look at expanding the nurture group provision. Again, I was delighted to hear the Minister's insight that there is a strong desire to see an expansion if possible. Of course, he has urged caution, as we know that there are budgetary pressures from all angles. However, despite the initial budgetary strain that they will exert, as has been said, nurture units have proven to be cost-effective. The estimated cost per year of reducing one child who is defined as having behavioural difficulties to within the normal range is just less than £13,000. The cost of a pupil with behavioural difficulties being provided with just one of the many additional resources during the school term between year 3 and year 12 will be at least twice as much to the education system as it would be by addressing those difficulties through effective nurture group provision before the start of year 3. It is considerably higher again if the child has to avail himself or herself of alternative full-time education provision and/or attend a special school. Existing evidence suggests that investment in nurture group provision is likely to pay for itself after just two years. It is therefore cost-effective and represents a significant economic return to society, along with the benefits that it brings to the child and their family.

The schools that were most effective at nurturing had a clearly defined, positive but firm approach to the way in which they spoke to pupils. They gave them clear boundaries, praised them for their efforts and achievements, ensured that they made academic progress and worked with their parents, who are, of course, children's first educators. They saw pupils as individuals and dealt with them as such — each individual is different in their circumstances and difficulties. Nurture groups gave parents practical support — that is very important — including strategies that they could use at home with their children. Parents felt more confident about being able to help their children and valued the nurture groups more highly.

As Chris Lyttle pointed out, there are some concerns that literacy and numeracy targets were not achieved in certain nurture groups. That is something that I hope will be addressed as they continue to develop. Let us be clear: children who are more well-rounded emotionally, behaviourally and socially will be more willing to dedicate themselves to learning in school.

Mr McElduff: From a party political perspective, Sinn Féin's position is that it will support the motion and the SDLP amendment.

12.45 pm

In my capacity as Cathaoirleach — Chair — of the Education Committee, I want to make a few remarks about our interest as a Statutory Committee in this matter to date. Nurture is a focused, school-based intervention, usually in primary schools, designed to address barriers to learning arising from unmet attachment needs. Nurture units provide a carefully planned safe environment in which to build an attachment relationship with a consistent and reliable adult. A small group of selected children spend the majority of the school week in the nurture unit receiving highly structured and supported learning experiences.

Our Committee saw evidence of something similar to this in action on a visit to a special school recently, where normal social interactions, eating breakfast, for example, are structured and used to support learning and engagement to positive effect. Anecdotal feedback and the Queen's University report suggest that the nurture approach has a very positive behavioural benefit on children, and nurture would, therefore, appear to sit well with other early intervention measures.

The Queen's University study seems to show that about one fifth of participating pupils moved down the SEN register, ie their special educational needs seemed to improve as a consequence of nurture. Nurture is also cost-effective: the cost per child appears to be around £13,000 per annum, contrasted with average costs of provision of support under a SEN statement of £10,000 per annum in primary and £7,000 per annum in post-primary. That might suggest that a more elaborate study needs to be carried out to establish whether schools with nurture units have fewer SEN statements.

Our Committee would also like to put on record support for the mainstreaming of nurture, but we may also want to see what impact it has on the overall level of SEN statementing in schools.

Mrs Barton: I do not think that anyone in the House will disagree that our children should be given the best start in life. Indeed, the findings of the Queen's University report clearly support the value of nurture groups as an effective intervention strategy, but the most important part of the motion is the final clause. It is

imperative that ways to utilise the best practice of nurture groups be identified and put into action in schools throughout Northern Ireland.

All counties have areas that could benefit from nurture groups. The principles that underpin all this work should include equal opportunity for all schools and that schools can adapt to the needs of all our children, be they suffering from a difficult home life, have special educational needs, or are gifted children who need stretching.

A nurture group typically caters for very young schoolchildren who have social, behavioural or emotional needs greater than the norm. Without specialist care, they can have a negative school experience and, indeed, make school life more difficult for their peers and teachers. Effective nurture systems can ease the child into mainstream schooling, equip them for school life and allow them to play a full role in their school.

As with so many of the issues that we discuss, identifying and addressing them as early as possible is the key to achieving optimal outcomes for the children, their parents and society as a whole.

While nurture groups here are traditionally attached to primary schools, in other parts of the UK more and more post-primary schools are setting up nurture groups, as pupils are increasingly presenting to these schools at an emotionally and socially different developmental stage.

Recent research shows that, after the formative years, the other major time restriction on the brain is the teenage years. Many principals today recognise the importance of how emotional well-being underpins learning and has a significant impact not only on attendance and behaviour but on academic achievement. Research also indicates that these nurture groups can have a whole-school effect, where not only children in the nurture group improve but so do other children with similar issues throughout the school.

It is clear, then, that nurture groups can make a substantial difference to the lives of the children who have the opportunity to be part of one. They improve behaviour, improve performance and improve outcomes for the children, but there are only 32 nurture groups in Northern Ireland and approximately 800 primary schools. Resources are not infinite, but the lessons of the nurture groups can be learned by all who are interested in the education of our children. The findings about the benefits of these small-

group situations for children supports how working in smaller groups can be so beneficial, and it has been proven that behaviour associated with engagement with the curriculum improves, the children settle quicker to work in the classroom and they gain ability to work collaboratively with other pupils. In supporting the motion, I urge that consideration be given to the scheme being extended to post-primary schools and that mainstream nurture provision be provided across the Province.

Ms Seeley: I thank the DUP for bringing the motion to the House; it is a motion that we are happy to support. A recent report in 'The Irish News' detailed the 529 children who are making consistently large improvements in social, emotional and behavioural development thanks to their inclusion in nurture provision. That alone is testament to the importance of continuing investment in nurture groups. The Queen's University of Belfast report on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of nurture group provision in the North accredits nurture groups with developing emotional literacy and resilience. It details how nurture groups are designed to enhance children's opportunities so that they can interact in a more positive way and have increased self-awareness, and it also enables the classroom assistant and the teacher to devise activities suited to the needs of individual children. There is no doubt that this results in the development of positive relationships, something that some of our children may not experience on the home front. Additionally, as the report notes, nurture groups are an effective form of early intervention through which teachers and classroom assistants can identify children who would benefit from an enriched learning experience.

Through involvement in these groups, teachers have the opportunity to develop children as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. I therefore welcome the Minister's commitment to fulfilling and, indeed, advancing the sterling work of his predecessor, my party colleague John O'Dowd MLA, who part-funded their expansion and targeted extra Department of Education resources to nurture groups.

As has been noted, nurture provision develops the language and communication skills of our children at early stages of their life, laying the building blocks for social interaction. These are life skills that they can avail themselves of for conflict resolution, anger management and when discussing and dealing with emotions, as well as when identifying a range of positive relationships. The advantages of more fully developing the language and communication

skills of children when they are in their early years cannot and should not be underestimated. Interventions such as this can determine the future of a child and their outcomes.

At a time of increased class sizes, sadly, some children risk slipping through the net. Full-to-the-brim classrooms do not create learning environments conducive for all. That is why it is important, moving forward, that area plans recognise this and do not target small schools but instead respond to need to secure investment into intervention mechanisms such as this.

Finally, the Queen's University of Belfast report not only recognises the need for evidence-based policymaking but identifies areas for improvement with regard to nurture provision. I hope that any future investment from the Minister will be geared towards that. I commend the motion, as amended by the SDLP, to the House.

Mr Durkan: I am happy to contribute to this important debate on an important issue. It is good to hear the support around the Chamber for nurture education. It is hard to imagine that anyone, anywhere would have any problems with it.

Nurture education developed in London in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a response to identified need. The provision offers a short-term focused intervention strategy that addresses barriers to learning arising from social, emotional or behavioural difficulties in an inclusive and supportive manner. As an early intervention strategy, the core focus group for nurture provision is pupils in the early stages of primary education, from primary 1 to primary 3. The core purposes of nurture education are to provide a flexible and preventative resource that is responsive to the particular needs of the children attending that nurture unit; to provide ongoing assessment and support for early years children showing signs of emotional stress and behavioural difficulties, with the aim of enabling the child to access the curriculum and return to full-time participation in their mainstream class; to help the children to learn to behave appropriately, which is something that some Members in here might be able to benefit from; to improve children's self-esteem and develop their confidence through forming close and trusting relationships with adults; and to work in partnership with teachers, parents, schools, staff and outside agencies to enable consistency of approach both at home and at school.

The motion refers to the Queen's report. Indeed, numerous studies and research projects have consistently highlighted the effectiveness of nurture education as an early intervention strategy. The success of nurture provision is evidenced clearly by the fact that there has been such a significant growth in it over the past number of years. In Glasgow, for example, there are a minimum of 68 nurture units, while we now have 32 in the North. In the Northern Ireland context, two evaluations of nurture provision have been conducted in the past year, and both have been highly positive in their conclusions. The ETI report, to which Mr Lyttle referred, reported the effectiveness of the provision and saw a need for even greater roll-out. The evaluation of the pilot nurture project in Northern Ireland conducted by Queen's was also highly positive about the benefits of nurture education and its cost-effectiveness.

It is clear that the evidence highlights the social, emotional, behavioural and educational benefits of nurture education as well as the economic benefits of this type of provision. While these reports have identified and highlighted the benefits of nurture education, I have also seen at first hand the benefits of nurture education to children and families. I pay tribute to a constituent of mine Garry Matthewson, who has been a great champion of and for nurture education not just in my constituency but right across the North and has worked closely with previous Ministers on the issue. I suppose that I also have to commend the work of previous Ministers. I have no doubt that the current Minister will work with Ministers across the Executive to progress this, because it is bigger than an education issue. It is clear to me that, as the outcomes of nurture education are a benefit to many Departments in our local Assembly and, indeed, society as a whole, it is only just that funding for nurture provision is either a shared fund from the various Departments that benefit, including Education, Communities, Health and Justice, or maybe more simply an Executive funding stream. Indeed, through Mr Agnew's Children's Services Co-operation Act, there is the scope and, actually, a duty for that to be done.

In our fragmented education system, it is important that all sectors have access to nurture provision so that no child or family —

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

Mr Durkan: — is required to leave that sector to access provision. My colleague referred to the Irish-medium sector, but it is my understanding that there is no nurture provision

in the integrated sector. Maybe the Minister will address that.

Madam Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. Beidh an Coiste Gnó ag a haon a chlog. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. Beidh Tráth na gCeist againn ansin. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Area Planning: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

1. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister of Education to outline how the Education Authority's 'Providing Pathways Draft Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020' will affect schools in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. (AQO 656/16-21)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for clarifying question 1. The draft strategic area plan for Northern Ireland, 'Providing Pathways', focuses on the education interests of children and young people. It aims to ensure that all pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs, delivered by schools that are educationally and financially viable. In the development of the draft strategic area plan for 2017-2020, the Education Authority (EA), working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the other sectoral support bodies, has analysed the current position and identified key strategic themes and issues that are impacting on the education system.

It is important to note that the draft strategic area plan is out to consultation at present, so we are not at the final stage. It does not identify individual schools, but will act as a catalyst for discussion at a regional and local level. The school planning and managing authorities will engage at a local level to determine the most

appropriate area solutions to ensure that children and young people have access to high-quality education, regardless of where they live. The aim at this stage is to look at a Northern Ireland-wide basis, though there is direct reference to the 11 council areas. Schools will be involved in the process at a formative stage and will have the opportunity to inform the development of the area solutions.

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that his statement on the Education Authority's plan has caused great concern for rural schools, which traditionally have lower pupil numbers. What assurances can the Minister give that rural proofing legislation will be properly considered so that no rural pupil loses out, and there will be no redundancies for teachers or other staff in the rural schools?

Mr Weir: Let me just tackle a couple of those points. We always have to focus on the schools, and we must ensure that there is proper provision of education for the children. An issue has been highlighted already where there are composite classes. Where, in particular, more than two years are involved, there is the danger that that does not provide the best possible education. On the basis of that, it is my intention to ensure that a strategic look is taken at schools to ensure that we do not have isolated communities and that there is some level of provision within that.

In the second or third part of the Member's supplementary question, there was mention of teacher redundancies. What has happened in the past and will continue to happen is that transferred redundancies will be looked at as the way of doing that, were a particular school to close or amalgamate. Within the system, there is enough provision for that to be taken care of. It is something that, in the past, EA or CCMS, as the managing authorities, have been able to do. Other teachers will be looking to retire, and transferred redundancies are the route to avoiding any form of compulsory redundancy, which no one wants.

Mrs Barton: Given that the financial context of savings is a major section of the draft area plan consultation document, can the Minister give details as to how much money will be saved by the implementation of the draft area plan? Where is that money committed to being spent?

Mr Weir: With respect, let me say a couple of things. I do not accept that savings are a major issue in the draft area plan. The key focus of the plan is on ensuring that there is good

provision of education. We all have to recognise that there is a degree of financial constraint. If there are changes made to the schools estate, and if they reduce pressures on issues around the small-schools factor, which is part of that, that money will recirculate within the aggregated schools budget. It is not a question of money being taken away from schools. Ultimately, there will be a set amount available to schools, and the distribution of it will depend on the number and location of schools. At the moment, because the schools estate is not fit for purpose, a lot of schools are not getting the level of spending and support that they should. I appreciate that Members from all parties in all locations will fight for their own area, but we also have to look at this in a mature and strategic way, which asks, "What is the best possible delivery of our education? How do we cope with an educational estate that is not fit for purpose and not meeting the demands of maintenance or educational need?". We need to have that level of mature discussion. It is not a question of money being taken out of education. It is a question of this: if the pressures are in different spheres, the money will be re-circulated within the schools budget.

Mr Lyttle: How will the Education Minister's failure to support the 1% pay increase for teachers in 2015-16 affect area planning for schools?

Mr Weir: That is a good attempt to shoehorn that in. I do not think it has any particular impact on area planning. We need to be responsible in the language we use. As for the money that was not there in 2015-16 to provide that 1%, let us remember that the overall wage bill for schools over the last two years will have gone up by 2.61% as a result of the pay settlements. The position for 2015-16 and 2016-17 is that all teachers below the top level will receive automatic increments. That is not the case in England, Scotland and Wales.

In area planning, the need is to focus on the best delivery of the schools estate. What individual teachers will get paid is not particularly relevant to area planning, and we should not be trying to conjoin the issues, even in a desperate attempt for a headline.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Could he tell the House what will happen to the area plan at the end of the consultation period?

Mr Weir: The consultation period, as you know, has been launched. It is due to complete on 12

December. It is an Education Authority consultation, and the Education Authority will have responsibility for analysing the responses and presenting a report on the issues raised. That will inform its final strategic plan, which will be for consideration in the new year.

The key objective in the area plan has identified the main issue to be addressed, which is a network of educational and financially viable schools. Once we get to that stage, an annual area plan will supplement the strategic area plan, so there will be one for 2017-18, another one for 2018-19 and one for 2019-20. It will contain details of the work programme of the planning and management authorities to address specific issues at local level. Area planning is a continuum, and that will be reflected in the annual area plan. That will, in turn, I suppose, lead to individual development proposals for schools, which will then have to go through a proper legal process. That is where the direct impact will be. A number of significant issues will be addressed. It is not possible to tackle everything at once. Therefore, the aim of the three-year plan is to identify priorities over a three-year period, and then drill down into those into annual plans.

Mr Lynch: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept there is no educational evidence or research to back up assertions on whether composite classes or single-year groups produce poorer educational outcomes?

Mr Weir: On the contrary, there is some evidence in relation to this, particularly with the differences. There is a limited amount of difference where you have children taught in a two-year composite class, although there is a level of additional differentiation there, which does make it difficult for the teacher.

If you speak to the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), it will say that it sees a considerable difference where you move beyond a simple two-year composite class and into settings where there are three years or more within a single class. A teacher is therefore trying to provide such a level of differentiation that it does have an impact. That is something that the ETI has raised.

Given the number of composite classes, some will continue. There are some very good teachers. The issue is that, once you get that differentiation in composite classes, it does make it more difficult for a teacher, and it is not the ideal situation.

Forge Integrated Primary School

2. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescales to approve development proposals to relocate Forge Integrated Primary School. (AQO 657/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. The Education Authority (EA) published three development proposals for Forge Integrated Primary School on 20 October 2016. I am sure that the Member is aware of that, but, for the benefit of the House, the three proposals are to relocate the school to the former Knockbreda High School site; to establish a 52-place part-time nursery unit; and to establish an autistic spectrum disorder centre at Key Stage 1 and a general learning support centre at Key Stage 2. The publication on 20 October triggered a two-month objection consultation period, during which my Department will take receipt of any issues that have been raised, including objections and expressions of support for each application. The objection period, or the development proposal period, will end on 20 December, and my officials will then compile and assess all pertinent information before making a recommendation to me. I will consider all the information and advice before taking a decision in the context of my Department's statutory duties, stated priorities and policies.

As the Member will appreciate, as the final decision maker, I will legally have to give a decision on that, so I cannot discuss the details of the individual development proposals today. I can assure you, however, that I will endeavour to complete the process that I have outlined to you as quickly as possible, but the time taken can vary, depending on the individual circumstances and complexity of each proposal. As with all development proposals, my decision will conclude the process. The issues around the implementation, if implementation is required, of my decision are then a matter for the Education Authority, as Forge is a controlled integrated school.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister. I ask what is almost a hypothetical question. Do you believe that the capital funding for this proposal could fit within the shared education campuses programme, and, if not, from where do you imagine funding will come?

Mr Weir: I am tempted to say that I have enough difficulty with real questions without hypothetical ones being added to the mix.

As part of Fresh Start, there are tranches of available funding. Forge Integrated has been selected to receive a new school build under the Fresh Start funding announcement that was made in March 2016. That new-build project is being led by the Education Authority. Such projects undergo a standard set of actions, and I suppose that the advantage is that the more the Department and the Education Authority are directly involved in new school builds, the more familiar they will get with the processes. The project for the new build for Forge Integrated is in the early stages, and the Department continues to work with the EA as required. On 27 April this year, an engagement event was held with all the schools — I think that there are 15 in total — for which funding under Fresh Start was announced on 23 March. The next step is site searches being commissioned, and that is the case with any new capital build. Members occasionally raise with me the point that there is a very obvious place for a particular school to go, but site searches are always commissioned with any new capital build, and work is under way to develop procurement documentation to engage integrated design teams. As with any proposal, barring any change that I have no control over, once a school has been announced for a new build, it will happen. It is not a question of there being any doubt about the capital build. Legally, the development proposals will have to be considered separately.

Ms Bailey: Given the consistent high demand and, in some cases, oversubscription, does the Minister feel that there is adequate provision of integrated education places in south Belfast?

Mr Weir: I am aware of the broader issues. It would be difficult to deal with the issues of the precise level of availability in south Belfast without touching on the development proposals. In dealing with development proposals, I cannot do anything that can be either taken as being in favour of or against a particular development proposal. There is a limited amount of detail that I can get into. There has been some work, which was commissioned by the previous Minister, on a strategic review of integrated education, and I look forward to looking into the detail of that when I am able to deal with it.

2.15 pm

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Minister for his answers. He has already touched on this, but will he outline how the Department of Education will ensure that Fresh Start Agreement funding is fully maximised?

Mr Weir: I want to make sure that it is fully maximised. When it was secured by the Executive, it came both with opportunities and constraints. It is probably fair to say that there was not great enthusiasm in the Treasury for signing up to everything in Fresh Start. The funding is for integrated and shared education, and there will be some funding for shared housing. I want to make sure that the maximum amount is used. We continue to engage with the Northern Ireland Office and are working to identify future projects. From that point of view, the initial call resulted in 15. Further calls have since gone out; indeed, I initiated a new call for shared education campuses just a few weeks ago.

There are ways of widening how things are done. At the moment, the focus of Fresh Start is on pure new capital funding, but we could, for example, ensure that there was a role for Fresh Start in the integrated sector by widening out the pool for the school enhancement programme. There is also the issue of end-year flexibility, which is directly outside my control; we want to raise that with the Northern Ireland Office. The provision in Fresh Start is £50 million for each of 10 years; if it is not spent in a particular year, the money effectively goes unspent. A new capital build, in particular, is not something that you can start on one day and have the money spent within a year; it takes time. So the more flexibility we can get from the Northern Ireland Office and the Treasury, the more we can maximise the amount going into school build via the Fresh Start Agreement.

Capital Spend: East Antrim

3. **Mr Lyons** asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's capital spend in East Antrim since 2011. (AQO 658/16-21)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. The Department of Education's total capital spend in East Antrim for the five full financial years since 2011-12 is £18.5 million. I do not have figures for the spend in the current year. Major capital programmes for St Killian's College, Islandmagee Primary School, Corran Integrated Primary School, Abbey Community College, Ulidia Integrated College and Woodburn Primary School have all been announced and are advanced in planning. Work to deliver those projects is being advanced jointly by the Department and the Education Authority. I will quiz Members on the names of all those schools later.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Minister for his answer. I impress on him the need for capital expenditure in East Antrim, on minor works in particular. A lot of schools have come to me with a lot of need. Can he update the House on the new build for Islandmagee Primary School, which is much anticipated by local people?

Mr Weir: The new-build primary school for the Islandmagee area was originally included in the January 2013 capital announcement, although it was subsequently withdrawn due to a change in the basis on which the project had been included. On 24 September 2014, the former Education Minister made a decision that the development proposal agreed in 2004 to amalgamate Kilcoan and Mullaghduh primary schools — I bow to local knowledge on pronunciation — to create the new Islandmagee Primary School remained extant. The decision allowed the project to be included in the March 2016 capital investment announcement. As a result, a project board with specific responsibility for the new build for Islandmagee Primary School was established on 27 June 2016, with representation from the school, the Education Authority and the Department of Education to ensure effective governance structures for the delivery of the project. Once there has been an announcement on the capital build, the processes will move ahead.

Mr Beggs: The development of Islandmagee Primary School has been rather torturous, in that it began in the early 2000s and has taken more than a decade.

Can the Minister assure us that the split site on which the school is now operating will increase the priority with which funding will actually be allocated and that there will be no further delays? Given that planning permission has now been delivered for Woodburn Primary School, when will both schools actually be built?

Mr Weir: Right: I will pick from the range of questions. I appreciate the strong involvement that the Member has had with this. The speed will be up to the project board but there will not be any unnecessary delays.

I appreciate the point made that there was a previous commitment over a decade ago. Indeed, in a situation where I think that there was anticipation then of ever-increasing capital amounts, a lot of projects were given the green light and then the plug was pulled on them. The Department has learned from that position. Only those projects that are gateway checked

and are therefore in a position to move ahead will get the green light.

I cannot give specific dates for when it will move ahead to completion but, as I said, the project board which brings it forward, irons out all the details and makes the arrangements, has been established and, therefore, this is something that will happen. There will not be any undue delay in that.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate that this question relates to a constituency-specific subject. With regard to the minor works programme, what action does the Minister propose to take about the totally inadequate outdoor boys and girls' toilets at Greenisland Primary School — his predecessor having visited the school — which were put up in the 1930s and, to this day, are totally and wholly inadequate for children in the modern age?

Mr Weir: Direct prioritisation of minor works is ultimately for the Education Authority. However, although it has been widely accepted that we are in a very tight resource regime, it is hoped that we will see and know a little bit better, roughly speaking, in a week's time, that things should improve on the capital side. I suppose, as with all minor works, it is a question of prioritisation. I appreciate, from what you have indicated, that this is something that — to slightly misquote a popular party tune — it is old but it is not beautiful in that location. As such, action will obviously need to be taken to rectify that, but there are a lot of calls on minor works.

School Programmes: East Antrim

4. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Education to outline any programmes in schools in East Antrim designed to deter children from illegal activity and paramilitary involvement. (AQO 659/16-21)

Mr Weir: There was just a bit of natural flow in that regard.

The statutory curriculum that is taught in all schools includes citizenship education which enables young people to participate positively and effectively in society, play their part in democratic processes and make informed and responsible decisions as citizens throughout their lives.

At primary level, it is part of the personal development and mutual understanding area of learning. Pupils look at diversity, cultural heritage, promoting inclusion, human rights,

causes of and responses to conflict, and playing an active and meaningful part in the community, all of which contribute to turning children away from involvement in illegal and paramilitary organisations.

Specifically, at post-primary level, local and global citizenship is part of the learning for life and work area. Pupils explore issues such as diversity, prejudice and racism, promoting inclusion and reconciliation, mutual respect, equality and human rights, social justice and exclusion, democracy, and participation through local and global examples.

In addition to this, because, as I may have mentioned earlier, we sometimes focus purely on what is happening in the classroom, my Department also provides funding directly to the Education Authority (EA) under the youth intervention programme. This is to support young people in times of community tension and unrest. Last year, the fund was a little bit over £800,000. This targeted programme enabled the creation of, if you like, diversionary activity for individuals who were often at risk of involvement in paramilitary activity. That is an important part of this as well.

I am not aware of specific programmes in schools in East Antrim per se but I hope that the aspects in the curriculum, as I have outlined them, will deter children from involvement in illegal and paramilitary activities. Nobody wants children to go down the wrong route in life. Whether it is paramilitary activity or other criminal activity, we all have to play our part in ensuring that we divert people from that.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, you will appreciate that, given the imminent and real danger to young people in East Antrim, particularly in Carrickfergus and Larne, intervention is vital for how we support our young people in those communities. In respect of dealing with paramilitaries, the Executive agreed an action plan, including an early intervention transformation programme. Have you met that board? What action will you take with the early intervention transformation programme board to deal with the matter?

Mr Weir: As yet, I have not had a direct meeting with the board, but I am happy to work alongside it. If we need to do things in a multi-agency or multi-departmental way, I am keen to embrace that. If young people go down that pathway, they are potentially creating a risk to society in terms of deaths, injuries and damage to property. That is bad enough, but added to that is the danger of a young person being left scarred for life by a criminal record. We should

take any steps that we can to divert people from that. I am happy to meet anybody in that regard. I will try to get the Member details of any activities that the EA has planned in East Antrim and send them to him.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Can you, Minister, give me your Department's assessment of the harm that the culture of paramilitary activity and domination in parts of Carrick and Larne is having on the educational attainment of young people and children? In the absence of such an assessment, will your Department consider carrying one out?

Mr Weir: I am not sure whether there is much point in doing something so specifically location-oriented. Unfortunately, there are still parts of Northern Ireland in which there is paramilitary activity and paramilitary organisations in both sections of the community. As I indicated, there is clear damage to the lives of young people who get involved, and they should be discouraged from any such activity. There is risk to their future long-term prospects in terms of criminal records and their life, let alone the damage that they do to others. As you indicated, it is also about the impact that that will have on their educational opportunities and the damage that is done. From that point of view, we need to look at how we can do that throughout Northern Ireland. If there are specific interventions that can happen in a constituency, I am happy for the EA to do those; it will perhaps know what needs to be done directly on the ground. If there is any form of audit, it needs to be taken forward on a much wider basis to ensure that all areas where there are problems are properly dealt with.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Phillip Logan for a brief question and a brief answer.

Mr Logan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. What progress has the Minister made on implementing the plans in the Fresh Start Agreement for tackling paramilitary activity?

Mr Weir: To add to what has been said, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) has provided outline costs for the development of curriculum materials to address the issues of paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. Those materials will support the delivery of citizenship education in the curriculum. It is designed to raise awareness and develop understanding of active citizenship and lawfulness.

We have to be mindful of the fact that most of us are of a generation who know about what happened throughout the Troubles. We knew about the damage that was done to society as a whole. A lot of people are growing up for whom it is simply a historical event. We have to make sure that young people do not repeat the mistakes of previous generations, so the damage that can be caused to young people and society has to be brought home to them.

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

Teachers' Pay: Union Discussions

T1. **Mr Mullan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on any discussions that he has had with the teachers' unions about pay concerns, especially with the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), which plans to hold a one-day strike next month. (AQT 476/16-21)

2.30 pm

Mr Weir: I appeal to people to show restraint and to not be involved directly in a strike. We are in a position, as indicated, and discussions have been ongoing for the last year or two. Do not forget that we are talking about an issue with the 2015-16 pay settlement in particular, which was never sorted out during 2015-16. There were various offers made, I understand, from management side to the unions, which were not accepted at various stages, and those negotiations broke down.

I think there is a willingness to have discussion on it, but the reality is that there is not any more money. We are in a situation where, as I said, over 2015-16 and 2016-17 teachers received an increase in the pay bill of 2.61%. We have to take increments into account. That means that, for 2015-16, every teacher in Northern Ireland who had a salary below £37,500 saw a pay increase last year. So, we have to deal with this through some objective facts. There is a tough financial regime out there for schools. While I am sure there is a strong desire to see additional pay, the reality is that the more we push up pay, the more current circumstances in the schools' budget will lead to further redundancies. I think there also has to be a balance struck between greater levels of pay and teachers losing their job. That will also have to be borne in mind. I do not have any additional money to throw at this issue.

Mr Mullan: Minister, thank you for your answers so far. I understand what you are trying to strive at. Do you agree that our teachers are as hard-working, dedicated and committed as any teacher within GB and are and should be entitled to the same levels of pay and should not be lagging two years behind?

Mr Weir: With respect, they are not lagging two years behind; that is an inaccuracy. It is also the case that every teacher below the top level received an increment for 2015-16 and will receive an increment and pay increase for 2016-17. In England, automatic pay increments were abolished a number of years ago, so, in that sense, it is not like for like. If people want to have like for like, there will be consequences of that as well. I think we have to get to the facts of the situation rather than always looking to see where there is parity when it suits and ignoring other occasions when it does not suit.

Transfer Test Guidance: Update

T2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his recently announced transfer test guidance. (AQT 477/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are a couple of aspects to that. Obviously, an announcement was made on guidance to primary schools for preparation. That gave primary schools a permissive environment in which to prepare children for issues with practice tests, a level of coaching for tests, a familiarisation with the facilities and, if there is agreement, to have the tests hosted in primary schools. I accept that, realistically, there will not be agreement on selection between the two Government parties, indeed there is a fairly great chasm within the Chamber on the issue. I am realistic enough to know that there is not going to be agreement, and I am not going to look for some sort of short-term fix for it for the next couple of years. As such, there will be efforts to see what can be done to make life easier for the children going through transfer. One aspect of that is to try to see whether we can reach an agreement on whether the two sets of tests that are there at present — the PPTC and AQE — can be a single agreed set of tests. To that extent, I have appointed an independent expert from outside Northern Ireland, who, therefore, maybe does not have the same connections with Northern Ireland, to see whether he can facilitate discussions, but those are at a very early stage.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. Minister, I have had very

positive feedback on the announcements. Do you think these changes will encourage more parents to enter their kids for the exams?

Mr Weir: A considerable number of pupils are entering for the transfer test. I think people can debate the merits of that, but it is very much a fact of life. It is also a fact of life that, clearly, given the level of demand, the transfer tests are here to stay. From that point of view, I think there will always be an individual choice for individual parents about the action they take in connection with that. Therefore, I suppose my role is to try to make the pathway as easy as possible and to not throw artificial barriers, to an extent, in their way or in the way of the schools and to try to make sure that provision, if you like, is given in what is always going to be a difficult issue — that of transfer — but is done in a way that does not add stress to the situation.

Educational Psychologists

T3. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Education whether he is content or satisfied with the number of educational psychologists that are available to carry out assessments on young children and young adults. (AQT 478/16-21)

Mr Weir: With regard to educational psychologists, there is an issue which is a joint working between the Departments of Education and Health. There are gaps in that, and we are hoping to close those in terms of numbers. I am happy to work with my colleague in Health at the Executive to ensure that we get timely interventions. It was mentioned earlier today when we were debating autism, for example, that one of the problems was early diagnosis, which principally lies with Health, but there is a joint responsibility. The sooner we can get to a diagnosis and, indeed, action to rectify some problems, the more advantageous to everybody.

Mr McCartney: Mo bhúiochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. While he waits to have that discussion with the Minister of Health, are there any actions that he could take to help reduce the waiting times, even in the short term?

Mr Weir: Strategically, we need to look at what actions can be taken to ensure that there is a smoother process, full stop. Whatever the direct contact between me and Michelle O'Neill in relation to this, there is ongoing work with the two Departments at official level. Particularly with regard to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 that

went through last year, part of that was to have a much greater sense of joined-up working, so there is liaison between officials. We need to ensure that, while there is good work going on at a departmental level, that permeates into the groundwork and we get that delivery for young children.

Outdoor Residential Activity Centres

T4. **Mr Aiken** asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the proposed closure of half of our eight outdoor residential activity centres, particularly because many studies have shown that building relationships, building leadership skills and giving our children a much-valued sense of the outdoors are key to development. (AQT 479/16-21)

Mr Weir: There are 12 outdoor centres; they are being reduced from 12 to eight. The Member seems to have missed out on four of them. The position is that it is a proposal by the Education Authority. There was an assessment in 2015 of the needs with regard to outdoor activity that concluded that we needed about eight instead of 12, so this follows through from that. There is no doubt that that is also a product of the pressures that are there financially. The Education Authority this year has had its budget reduced by about £20 million, and there is £20 million of pressures. That is the situation with the overall budget. To be fair to the previous Minister, something I have tried to do as well is, as much as possible, protect the front-line schools budget. That means that — probably disproportionately, to be fair — the Education Authority has had to bear that weight of responsibility.

Everyone is aware of the good work being done in outdoor education centres. There will still be availability of that through any new scheme, but it will be the situation that, if the Education Authority has to make a level of cuts, it is also incumbent on people. There are certain things that can happen in voluntary redundancy and that type of thing, but that will not close the entire gap. If, for example, as a result of this exercise, there is a determination that these are not the right cuts, there will also be an onus on people to say, in a responsible fashion, where the other cuts should come from. We are at the consultation process, and those are the arguments that should be made. Another issue that people will have to consider is whether, if there is a reduction in outdoor centres, these are the right ones to remove. That has also got to be borne in mind in any discussion.

Mr Aiken: I apologise to the Minister; I meant eight large outdoor activity centres rather than the overall number.

With regard to your answer, one of the questions that we have to ask on the identified savings of £1.5 million is whether there are specific areas that you are looking to use those savings from. Like some of the other activities that we are doing, are you looking to use those for things like adventurous training, leadership and teamwork and how can we do that?

Mr Weir: It is not a question of that money being hypothecated. First of all, I will indicate that the issue is that the Education Authority has a budget. The decision on the outdoor centres is a decision, ultimately, for them. The issue is that they have to live within their budget. To be fair, there would not be the same compelling financial case for change if it was simply a question of £1.5 million or whatever amount of saving simply being redirected into another activity. The argument would then be that what is there is not broke so it does not need fixing. The issue is that there are pressures for a range of activities, such as the increasing costs of special needs education, which are going up year-on-year. As for the overall budget share, the Department's budget was reduced in 2016-17, and the Education Authority, to be fair to it, bore a disproportionate amount of that cut. They have to make ends meet, so it is not a question of recycling the money; it is about trying to ensure that they remain within budget. It is a requirement that they have, and it is one that I have with my budget, too.

Early Years Provision: South Belfast

T5. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Education to outline what provision is planned for early years in the South Belfast constituency over the next five years. (AQT 480/16-21)

Mr Weir: The aim is to make sure that a preschool place is available for every child in the immediate preschool year. It is also an aim of the draft Programme for Government and one that I plan to continue. The preschool education advisory group in the EA has direct responsibility for ensuring there is adequate preschool provision in local areas and to allocate funded places on the basis of local need. For 2016-17, every child whose parents stayed to the end with the admissions process in the South Belfast constituency received the offer of a preschool place. I want to ensure that that continues, so that we have that level of

adequate provision throughout Northern Ireland, not simply in South Belfast.

Mr Stalford: The Minister will know that, as well as preschool places, Sure Start plays a valuable and important role, particularly in helping people from deprived communities get back into work. What provision and support is there for Sure Start in South Belfast?

Mr Weir: The current investment across Northern Ireland as a whole is about £25 million per year, which is administered by the Health and Social Care Board under a service-level agreement with the Department of Education. There are 39 Sure Start projects across Northern Ireland. The core budget for Sure Start in South Belfast in 2016-17 is £920,000. The Sure Start project involves services to legacy wards. Prior to the rejigging of the boundaries in Belfast, these included Ballynafeigh, Shaftesbury, Botanic, Blackstaff, Upper Malone, which despite its name includes Taughmonagh and Benmore, and, through the expansion of services, Minnowburn, as part of the Beechill ward, which falls within the Belvoir estate. In addition to the ongoing resource costs, the Department has made a capital investment totalling £359,000 in 2015-16 for the purchase and refurbishment of the former Belvoir Clinic premises to enable the expansion of South Belfast Sure Start.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Paul Frew for a brief question.

Schools: Maintenance Budget/Budget Powers

T6. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Education to shed some light on the circumstances that have led to him being contacted by many school principals from North Antrim about the Education Authority's maintenance department, which is telling them that there has been no budget for maintenance work since the start of the financial year; and, in anticipating that he will not get to ask a supplementary question, for an update on the Minister's plan to give more powers to principals over their school budgets. (AQT 481/16-21)

Mr Weir: In shopping terms, I think that is what is called a two-for-one offer.

It is not true that there has not been any money. The level of the maintenance budget from the Department, through the EA, has been about £14 million this year. That is probably less than what is needed, and that means that things

have had to be prioritised on the basis of health and safety.

I wrote to principals and schools in the last week or so to get an indication of their views on greater autonomy. If there is a good argument that there are parts of the budget that could be better utilised by schools themselves in a sensible fashion, I am very open to it.

That correspondence is fairly open-ended for suggestions. It does not concentrate on particular aspects, such as maintenance or procurement, but those can easily be brought back to me in a response from schools.

2.45 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up. We must move on to questions to the Minister for Communities.

Communities

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 1 has been withdrawn.

Social Security Offices/Jobcentres

2. **Mr McKee** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the review of social security offices and jobcentres in Cookstown, Ballynahinch and Newcastle. (AQO 672/16-21)

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): A public consultation on the proposed closure of the social security offices and jobcentres in Cookstown, Ballynahinch and Newcastle was launched on 20 September and will complete on 15 November. The consultation is an opportunity for claimants, staff, public representatives and other stakeholders to comment on and raise concerns regarding the proposed closures of the offices. Decisions will not be made until I have had an opportunity to consider fully all responses to the consultation.

Mr McKee: Given all the changes to social security that are being brought in at the moment and the extra resources that have been put into advice services, does the Minister recognise that closing jobs and benefits offices in major towns across the country makes no sense?

Mr Givan: What makes sense is my Department reviewing the services that it provides in the light of the changes that are coming about through the introduction of

universal credit. Welfare is changing, and the services that my Department provides need to recognise that environment and deliver services efficiently in a space where the budgets that my Department has to deal with are constrained. We are looking at the responses, and I will consider them in due course.

Mr McGrath: Why did the Minister not have 60 seconds to 90 seconds to meet the staff in the Great Hall today to receive their petition, which, at the very least, would have been a nice gesture?

Mr Givan: Today I was opening a new facility for young people who come out of care in my constituency whom Fold and MACS NI have been dealing with. It will help people who have been homeless. I then went to meet people from the faith community at a conference at the Ramada Hotel and arrived in Parliament Buildings five minutes ago to deal with Question Time. If the individuals are still in the Great Hall when the debate commences, I will be more than happy to meet them.

Mr K Buchanan: Will the Minister confirm that all claimants will have access to the same level of customer service that they currently have?

Mr Givan: There should not be any negative customer service impacts on claimants. Claimants affected by any proposed closures will continue to be able to access face-to-face services from alternative offices within a reasonable travelling distance. There will be a greater choice of access channels for customers, with discretionary support offering a telephony delivery model and universal credit offering an online model.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister provide an overview of the discussions that he had with the unions and staff representatives prior to the consultation?

Mr Givan: The consultation process is being carried out by the Department. I approved its commencement. Obviously, there will have been engagement between my departmental officials and those on the trade union side, but this is a consultation process, and no decisions have been taken. The consultation process closes today, and we will have an Adjournment debate later this afternoon that the Member herself has brought to the House. I will be able to elaborate on the process that is being followed and what the next steps may be.

Ms Armstrong: What rural-proofing criteria will the Minister use when making the decision to

close — if he is going to close — any of the social security offices, given the fact that, if the Ballynahinch office in my constituency closes, face-to-face meetings in other areas will not be possible, because transport is so limited?

Mr Givan: There was rural proofing through engagement with the Department of Agriculture. That document was published on 4 November. Those are issues that need to be taken into account whenever we are dealing with this.

The service is changing, and the need for people to come in and sign on is changing. I am concerned with delivering a service that best meets the needs of the individuals who have to use it but also one that my Department is responsible for within the budgetary constraints that exist.

Sexual Orientation

3. **Mrs Long** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the action his Department is taking to improve good relations with regard to sexual orientation. (AQO 673/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Member will be aware that section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory duty on all public authorities to promote equality of opportunity between a wide range of groups such as:

persons of different religious beliefs, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation

between men and women generally;

between persons with a disability and persons without;

and between persons with dependants and persons without.

Furthermore, section 75(2) states:

a public authority in carrying out its functions relating to Northern Ireland shall have regard to ... promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

My Department has published an interim equality scheme that sets out how, as a Department, we propose to fulfil our section 75 statutory duties. In addition, my Department is required to provide an annual progress report to the Equality Commission setting out how we have delivered against those statutory duties.

The first Department for Communities section 75 annual progress report will be completed for 2016-17 and will be made available following submission to the Equality Commission in August 2017. I will be happy to have a copy, when it is published, sent to the Member if that would be useful.

Mrs Long: I thank the Minister for his answer with respect to setting out what section 75 is meant to achieve. However, I will take the opportunity to remind the Minister of the question: what action does he intend to take to improve good relations with respect to those of different sexual orientations, and can he address that specific issue in his answer?

Mr Givan: Section 75 is applicable right across the areas that I have highlighted in Departments and their duties to deal with all the issues raised in section 75. That is the statutory instrument that Departments have to abide by, and I will certainly do that.

Ms Hanna: I ask the Minister what action he is taking to meet and engage with the LGBT community as he develops his departmental strategy.

Mr Givan: Obviously, my door is open to people who want to engage with me. This is an area that I have touched upon in the House before. When dealing with section 75, and the different groups that exist, we must acknowledge that people have different characteristics that they identify by. It is important that we, as a society, respect all those different characteristics and that we find a space in our society where people can accommodate differences so that, where differences exist, they can be expressed in a way that is respectful.

It is important that, in promoting one's identity, we do not denigrate another's identity. That is how our society would be best placed to evolve when it comes to dealing respectfully with individuals, irrespective of their background.

Mr Middleton: Can the Minister outline his approach to dealing with the needs of people right across the section 75 groups?

Mr Givan: This is a very important issue to us. Obviously, the case that was heard in the Court of Appeal raised the issue of the conflict that, at times, can exist. As a society, we need to find ways of navigating those differences, but it is beyond the issues that seem to dominate the debate on section 75 — sexual orientation and religious belief. When we look at all the groups

in section 75, we see that it is about helping people who have disabilities and the broad spectrum that it covers. It is important that we look at those issues in their totality and find a way of addressing all the issues raised by how people identify and that we do so by trying to find a respectful dialogue while acknowledging that differences exist, and where you can make reasonable accommodation for that, it should be carried forward.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. The Minister has partially answered my question. How can he ensure that equality protections will be adhered to for the LGBT community in his Department, including arm's-length bodies?

Mr Givan: Section 75 is applicable to arm's-length bodies as well. Obviously, all arm's-length bodies should be complying with the law. I expect that, whether it is my Department or the arm's-length bodies, when dealing with these issues, you find a way to comply with the law, and that everybody can be treated equally in the services that have to be delivered by the state.

I make the comment again that there will be occasions when the different characteristics identified in section 75 will be in conflict. It is in that space that we need to find a way in which our society can manage that. Again, I do not believe that the promotion of one's identity should be carried forward in a way that denigrates another individual's identity. It is in that space that, I think, the challenge to the Assembly is this: what type of society do we want to have? Is it one that respects that difference? Is it one that can reasonably accommodate those differences? Is it one where a particular section 75 group will want to enforce its will upon another section 75 group? That is not equality, and I believe that there is a better way to do things than what has happened heretofore.

Mr Agnew: Can the Minister confirm that LGBT representative groups have sought to engage constructively with him and his Department? Will he give a commitment that he will not let the minority who may troll on the Internet affect the work that he does with that community?

Mr Givan: The Member makes a valid point. I think that there will be individuals on the extremes who identify with whatever characteristic I have referred to so far. That should not put people off being able to have dialogue on these issues. I give an assurance that I recognise that social media can be a very

powerful and useful tool, but it does attract individuals who will, at times, misrepresent the broader interests of the characteristic that is identified. Again, my door is open. I am happy to have a conversation about these issues; I think that is important. It is also important that that conversation is carried out in a respectful manner, recognising that people will come to the table with different views on how we navigate around these issues. If the starting place in all this is treating each other with respect then, potentially, there is a way in which we can find an accommodation.

Fresh Start Panel Report

4. **Dr Farry** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the action his Department has taken to date to implement the recommendations of the Fresh Start panel report on the 'Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland'. (AQO 674/16-21)

Mr Givan: Following publication of the panel's report on 7 June, the Executive launched their action plan for tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime on 19 July. Implementation of the plan is being taken forward by a cross-departmental programme board, led by the Department of Justice. I am fully committed to delivering on my Department's responsibilities in the action plan, which include: to work with local voluntary and community organisations to promote a culture of lawfulness; to take forward a programme to increase the influence of women in community development; to establish a fund to support ambitious initiatives aimed at building capacity in communities in transition; and to consider how funding can be made available, within existing accountability guidelines for managing public money, to support such activities. The work forms an integral part of the new Programme for Government. We have made significant progress to date in consulting with key stakeholders across all sectors and will continue to report progress through the programme board.

Dr Farry: I am concerned that the Minister has omitted to refer to recommendation D2 of the panel's report, which refers to the need to tackle segregation in housing and "set ambitious targets and milestones" in that regard. I remind him that the Fresh Start Agreement itself links the issue of tackling division to being central to eradicating paramilitary activity. Therefore, I ask the Minister to confirm whether, in his view and that of his Department, there is a very firm link between the promotion of mixed, shared

and integrated housing and the eradication, finally, of paramilitary activity from our society?

Mr Givan: That issue has been touched on before in the Assembly in respect of shared housing. I believe that when you create the environment in which people can have confidence, you will naturally develop shared housing. There are specific requirements that my Department will, of course, meet when it comes to developing shared housing areas.

In the broader sense, whether it is social housing or private housing, it is about building confidence in our communities so that people feel at ease with one another, and that will then develop into mixed housing areas. What I do not believe in is somehow socially engineering outcomes. People should be given houses on the basis of need; it should not be on the basis of one's religion.

I recognise that that is a strange concept for the Alliance Party. It supported the discrimination of Protestants when it came to Police Service recruitment and is now putting forward the case that people should be denied a house on the basis of their religion. I will not support that.

3.00 pm

Dr Farry: Recommendation D2 in the report has been abandoned.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind Members that there should be no comments from a seated position, please.

Ms Mallon: Does the Minister agree that the decision that has been taken by the British Government not to release £5 million in funding because of a lack of detail in the Executive's plan to address paramilitarism is deeply embarrassing for the Executive?

Mr Givan: I met the Secretary of State recently, and we discussed how we will tackle paramilitary activity and the responsibilities that my Department will have in that area. I am confident that the money that is being made available to the Northern Ireland Executive will be released by the Treasury in due course.

Mr Logan: Will the Minister outline what progress he has made in promoting a culture of lawfulness in Northern Ireland?

Mr Givan: That is, of course, very important. The Department has been working on a scoping exercise with the Strategic Investment

Board that will make recommendations on how we can work together with our arm's-length bodies and voluntary and community sector organisations to promote and develop a culture of lawfulness in our society. The Department intends to run a series of pilot programmes in early 2017 to test collaborative interventions that specifically promote lawfulness. We are also working through the joint government/voluntary and community sector forum to consider how that work can be factored into the existing partnership agreement between government and the sector.

Ms Archibald: Will the Minister give an update on any discussions that his Department is engaged in with the community and voluntary sector on how it can support the implementation of the recommendations arising from the Fresh Start panel report?

Mr Givan: I touched on that engagement in answer to the previous question from my colleague Mr Logan. The Department is engaging with the voluntary and community sector, and work is ongoing, for example, with those who represent the Women's Support Network and so on to look at enhancing the role of women in communities. It is vital that it is delivered at a community level. Government from on high telling communities how they need to develop can, I believe, work only when the community is working with you. The voluntary and community sector plays an important role in that and will have an important role in taking forward the recommendations.

Mr Allister: The panel report states:

"It is important that those who do business with Government ... should be consistent positive examples to their communities. We recommend that the Executive ... should review their protocols for engaging with representatives of paramilitary groups."

Why, on the very morning after another BBC 'Spotlight' exposure of paramilitary links to an office on the Shankill Road, did the Minister think it appropriate to visit that office and be photographed with at least one paramilitary figure?

Mr Givan: I will go to constituencies and meet organisations. When I met that organisation, a conversation took place about supporting the PSNI and upholding the rule of law, and those who responded were categorical in saying that it is for the PSNI to deal effectively with issues of law and order.

The recommendations in the report state that we need to support communities that are moving into a transitional process. I can speak only about those in my constituency, but there are those who have pasts and prison records, and I recognise the work that they have been doing to move the community forward. I am prepared to work with those individuals on the basis that they support only the PSNI. That is certainly the case with the individuals whom I have been working with and will continue to work with. It is, of course, important that organisations are always looked at in terms of those protocols.

When it comes to being the judge on all those things, given the Member's legal expertise, he will know that, if individuals are breaking the law, it is for the PSNI to arrest and charge them.

What I have heard from a number of Members is that they have been acting as judge and jury over a number of these individuals as opposed to allowing the forces of law and order to deal effectively with them. It is for them to make those judgements and to prosecute people where they break the law.

Casement Park

5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the Ulster GAA's new plans for Casement Park. (AQO 675/16-21)

Mr Givan: I recently met the GAA, which presented the emerging design for the redevelopment of Casement Park prior to the launch of its phase 2 community consultation. The design proposals presented by the GAA demonstrated how issues raised in the 2014 judicial review and through the phase 1 community consultation have been incorporated into the designs.

My Department remains fully committed to the redevelopment of Casement Park and will continue to work with all parties to ensure the successful delivery of a new, safe stadium at the Casement Park site. It is anticipated that a new planning application will be submitted in the third quarter of the 2016-17 financial year.

Mr Sheehan: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give a reassurance that the social clauses for the redevelopment of Casement Park will be an integral part of the redevelopment of a new stadium?

Mr Givan: I am happy to give that assurance. In a lot of these contracts, the Executive are very much of the view that the social clauses are very important and can help people to get the skills they need to get future employment. They give people an opportunity. So, as this is developed, they are something I will want to see included. They will have a positive impact on those who will benefit from it, and the community will obviously get a benefit from that.

Mr Stalford: I am sure the Minister will agree with me that the rights of residents who live in the vicinity of large stadiums should be respected. In that regard, will the Minister outline what actions his Department is taking to address the concerns of residents who live in the vicinity of Windsor Park?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his question. It is an issue he has raised with me on a number of occasions. These stadiums are, obviously, in residential areas. Casement will be in a heavily populated residential area, as are Ravenhill, or Kingspan, and the national stadium at Windsor Park. Therefore, it is important that there is constructive engagement with the local community.

Where the national stadium is concerned, there is a community stadium board. That was a requirement from the Department in the money that was allocated to the IFA. That board meets on numerous occasions. It has representatives and key stakeholders, including the council, the Police Service and local residents, and it provides a forum for ongoing local engagement and discussion. I know there will be further work with the Department and officials who are working with Mr Stalford to determine the nature and extent of the issues being faced by residents. It is in everybody's interests that these issues are effectively managed, and residents are supportive of the work that is taking place at the national stadium at Windsor Park.

Mrs Palmer: Does the Minister agree that safety is a paramount consideration and planning decisions must be made on material planning grounds? Will he encourage his colleague the Minister for Infrastructure to take his decision on Casement on a completely non-political basis?

Mr Givan: The Member invites me to get involved in something that is not my responsibility. It will be for the GAA to submit the planning application. I have made it clear from my point of view and that of the Department that there is an Executive

commitment to develop the three stadia. This is the last one that needs to be delivered on, but it is for the GAA to develop that planning application. It has gone through that process. It is moving into the next phase, and it is for the GAA to navigate through the processes. I do not know whether it is a matter for the Department for Infrastructure or whether it will be Belfast City Council, but that will be something I am sure the Department will deal with and deal with according to due process.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Minister recognise the invaluable contribution that the GAA has played in communities such as mine? What is the Minister doing to promote and support the enhancement of the sport going forward?

Mr Givan: I certainly do. I met Danny Murphy recently, and we had a broad conversation around how the GAA plays an important role in the community. It was a frank conversation. I very much value the work that the GAA does from a sporting perspective, and I acknowledged that. We also had a discussion around the Irish language and the more cultural dimension of the GAA, and that was a conversation that was honest. It was one where the GAA was very clear on its view that this is fundamental to the organisation. I indicated to it that, when I meet the Irish Football Association and when I meet Ulster Rugby, neither of those organisations lobbies me around cultural issues. That makes the GAA unique, and I believe that that presents challenges. From a sporting perspective, I am very supportive of it.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Minister support the Executive-agreed subregional football stadia funding programme commitment to redevelop the Oval, in partnership with Glentoran Football Club, on a budget of £10 million? Why has he refused to meet Naomi Long and me on this matter, despite meeting numerous DUP MLAs on the issue?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): While that is not relevant to the question, it is, of course, up to the Minister's discretion to determine the answer.

Ulster Fleadh 2016

6. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the 2016 Ulster Fleadh in Bangor organised by Comhaltas Uládh. (AQO 676/16-21)

Mr Givan: I believe that the 2016 Ulster Fleadh, which was held in Bangor for the first time and which ran over a period of nine days in July, was successful. Thousands of people attended and participated in the festival, and the 25 events and sessions that took place were well supported. The "Bagoa" — I may have pronounced that incorrectly, but I understand that it translates as "lively", so I do have some knowledge — concert had approximately 500 in attendance, and the Sands Family concert was also a major triumph, with over 350 attending the event. Overall, the Fleadh incorporated a wide variety of events that took place across different venues in the Ards and North Down borough. The report from local businesses was that it was beneficial to the local economy through the bed-nights that it created. The Fleadh was also recently awarded the best tourist event or activity in the North Down Business Awards 2016. Of course, the Ulster Fleadh is to return to Bangor in July next year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I call the Member for a supplementary, I advise Members to tone down the background noise a bit in order that the questions and, indeed, the responses can be heard. Thank you for that.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer. I think that the group that the Minister is referring to is Beoga. Can the Minister give his assurance that his Department and its ALBs will give the work of the Comhaltas the same value as the other federations that are involved with music and bands?

Mr Givan: Unfortunately, my Irish is not quite as good as Her Majesty the Queen's, so apologies for that. I recognise the cultural value that Comhaltas provides. I expect it, and any organisation in the arts, to be treated fairly when it comes to the different funding streams that are available through the Arts Council and when applications are put forward. Where they meet the requirements in the criteria, they will be successful. I have said before in the House that I recognise the cultural diversity that exists in Northern Ireland, and I believe that it enriches our heritage and should be supported.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Very briefly, Joanne Bunting.

Ms Bunting: Still on a musical theme, given the successful reintroduction of the musical instruments for bands programme, does the Minister have plans to review this programme overall?

Mr Givan: This has been a hugely successful scheme that I reintroduced; it did previously exist. However, the fact has been highlighted in the process that the criteria should be looked at, and therefore I will establish a steering group that will conduct a review of the musical instruments for bands policy.

Again, that fund is available to all who are eligible, whatever section of the community they are from.

3.15 pm

Mr Chambers: Minister, I can confirm that this was an event enjoyed by visitors and locals alike. We look forward to its return. Will the Minister take this opportunity to acknowledge and compliment the work of volunteers and venue owners who make events like this happen?

Mr Givan: These events are successful. This generated over 800 bed-nights in north Down. Thousands of people attended, and therefore there is a benefit to the local community. The volunteers who support events like this and events that take place right across the Province in a whole range of areas, whether cultural or sporting, generate a positive impact for the local business community. The businesses that embrace these activities will see financial benefit, so it should be a win-win.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up. We now move to topical questions.

Urban Regeneration and Community Development Powers

T1. **Mr Smith** asked the Minister for Communities, given that, when Jo-Anne Dobson asked him in June about his plans for the devolution of urban regeneration and community development powers to the 11 new councils, he said that a decision would have to be made sooner rather than later, to state how that decision is coming along. (AQT 486/16-21)

Mr Givan: The decision on that issue will be taken soon. The Member will not have long to wait for the outcome. Obviously, the rationale for the decision that will be taken will be explained at that time. It is an area that I have been considering in the light of my Department's responsibilities, and an announcement will be made to the House in due course.

Mr Smith: I thank the Minister for his update. Will he, with his responsibilities for local government, support and champion the devolution of powers to local councils from all Stormont Departments? Will he ensure that, if and when these powers are devolved, an adequate budget goes with them?

Mr Givan: It is vital that the resource follows whatever powers are transferred to local government. At the partnership panel that I am responsible for chairing, I had a discussion with representatives from local government about the powers that they have, and there is a conversation to be had about what future powers they may wish to have. However, I am very clear that wherever the service is being delivered, whether it is at Stormont or through local government or arm's-length bodies, there is a need to make sure that the relationship is one that works effectively. The taxpayer or ratepayer often does not differentiate between local government and central government. Ultimately, what they are interested in is having the service delivered. I am interested in ensuring that we deliver the service and do so effectively and efficiently.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Community Halls Pilot Scheme

T3. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the community halls scheme. (AQT 488/16-21)

Mr Givan: The Department launched the community halls pilot scheme on 19 October. The concept of the programme was to invest in community halls to improve the fabric of these valuable community assets. The scheme is open to all community organisations that own or hold a lease to operate a community hall. The maximum award available to a community hall is £25,000. I can inform the House that, so far, the programme has generated a huge appetite. The delivery team has fielded numerous queries and attended a number of information sessions that were organised by various community groups throughout Northern Ireland, such as County Armagh Community Development. The programme closes for applications at noon on 23 November. Late applications will not be accepted. To date, the Department has received 34 applications with a cumulative valuation of £644,000.

Mr T Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. In the light of the huge interest in this scheme — no doubt more applications will

come in — will the Minister give some consideration to allocating more money to it in-year and in the years that lie ahead?

Mr Givan: Applications are still open, and I encourage people to continue to apply. There was £0.5 million identified within the Department this year. We are oversubscribed already, but I encourage groups to continue to make applications. I will look at the resources available in the Department. Where we can find additional moneys, those will be found, because the value of this scheme is widely recognised right across the community.

Therefore, applications should continue to come in. Given the success of the scheme and the interest that it has already generated, it is something that we will need to look at in future years for the capital programme.

Housing Associations: Reclassification

T4. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the proposed derogation of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) decision to reclassify the housing associations, including any discussions that he has had with the Minister of Finance. (AQT 489/16-21)

Mr Givan: Responsibility for seeking that derogation from the Treasury now rests with the Minister of Finance. Work is ongoing, but the Minister of Finance has the responsibility for taking the discussions forward. As the Member knows, when it comes to relations with the Treasury, it is always the Minister of Finance who leads on behalf of whatever Department is impacted on, which in this case is my Department.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his response. As he said, the impact of this will very much be on his Department. Is he reassured that we are going to get a successful outcome, given the potential impact that the derogation will have on our ability to provide social housing? Is he confident that we will be able to do the work required?

Mr Givan: The Executive recognised that the direction of travel was going to take us to this place, albeit we had to wait until the ONS took its decision. We had to know the detail of the decision and how it would have an impact in order to know how to respond. The Executive agreed that we will seek the derogation, and we have already, at that high level, agreed the

strategic approach to it. It is now about seeking the derogation and then implementing the changes that will be required as a result of the ONS announcement. The swift action taken by the Executive means that I am confident that we will be able to deal with the issue effectively.

Small Grants Programme: Update

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the small grants capital pilot programme. (AQT 490/16-21)

Mr Givan: If there is a specific area of the small grants capital programme that the Member wants to raise with me, I will be happy to look at it. In the general sense, I need a little more detail, unless the Member is lining me up for the sucker punch in his supplementary question.

Mr McAleer: No, Minister, I am not lining you up for a sucker punch, I assure you. I was just looking for an update on the level of interest and the number of applications, for example. My supplementary question is specifically on the issue of partnerships. One focus of the grant programme is partnership, and I am curious to know how that will be assessed. For example, should joint applications be made? By what means will that partnership be assessed? Will groups need to collaborate to apply?

Mr Givan: I have had a bit more time now to collect my thoughts. The question relates to the £300,000 that is currently open for applications. That recognises the important work that a lot of our community-based organisations carry out. Applications can be made for sums of between £1,500 and £5,000. Obviously, the criteria include partnership. Those applications are open, and I say to groups that are interested that there is a dedicated resource that will be able to advise them on how to apply and on the criteria that they need to meet to receive that funding.

I engaged with a lot of our community-based organisations, and they highlighted the need for small capital equipment, whether it be sports equipment or even a lawnmower to cut grass at the facility used. Groups often find it very difficult to raise that type of money for such capital equipment. Therefore, we developed a scheme that, I believe, will be successful. If the Member knows of any groups that are interested in the scheme, support is available to guide people through the application process. I am confident that the scheme will again be one that is oversubscribed.

Londonderry Bands Forum: Marching Bands Report

T6. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister for Communities to outline his view on the recent publication of a report by the Londonderry Bands Forum in relation to marching bands. (AQT 491/16-21)

Mr Givan: I have been in Londonderry, and my colleague has invited me on numerous occasions. There is one thing about the folk from the north-west: they are always keen to get you up there, and when they get you, it is very difficult to get away. I have met a number of groups. The Londonderry Bands Forum is one that I have met on numerous occasions, and it has demonstrated the positive impact that it has had in that community. It has taken bold steps and has broken down perceptions and barriers that might have existed between communities. It is an organisation that is doing excellent work, and the report demonstrated that.

I will be keen to take forward the work on this in recognising that via the Arts Council, which provides support to the Londonderry Bands Forum on a range of activities. Where the Member can keep making the case, I am keen to support that organisation in its work.

Mr Middleton: The Minister outlined a review into marching bands' funding. Will the Minister consider, as part of that review, the need for bands to have resource as well as capital funding made available?

Mr Givan: That is an issue that I know is being raised, not least by the Member. I have asked my officials to engage with the forum, along with a range of stakeholders who have an interest in that area. This is something that will be given consideration in the discussions.

Social Housing: Adapted New Builds

T7. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister for Communities how he plans to meet the needs of those people who require specially adapted new builds in the Mid Ulster area. (AQT 492/16-21)

Mr Givan: We have been looking at special adaptations in homes across the Province, not in just Mid Ulster. The Housing Executive is looking at how we address those needs and at the criteria for new builds to make sure that

there is scope for having buildings with the required special adaptations.

Mr Milne: I thank the Minister for his response. I asked the question in the knowledge of the dire need in the Mid Ulster area among some families for such new builds. There is a long waiting list. Housing associations do not have plans to bring that about in the short term. My supplementary question is to ask you to treat this as a matter of urgency.

Mr Givan: I reassure the Member that this is an area that I have been engaging on with the Housing Executive. Indeed, I am due to have one of the annual reviews that take place with the Housing Executive. Let me assure the Member that I will put on the agenda for that formal meeting how the Housing Executive will address the issue that the Member has raised.

Social Housing: Fermanagh and South Tyrone

T8. **Mr McPhillips** asked the Minister for Communities whether his Department has plans to build any social housing in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, given that he will be aware that the social housing waiting list in that constituency is continuing to grow, with demand greatly outweighing supply. (AQT 493/16-21)

Mr Givan: This is an issue that all Members raise when it comes to the need for social housing. His own party had a debate on the issue, and I put on record our desire to deliver the numbers of social homes over the period of this Assembly. That is a challenging and ambitious target that we are setting ourselves. Of course, Fermanagh and South Tyrone will be an area where we will want to deliver new homes.

The Executive are clear that we want to deliver new social homes. We want to improve people's housing environment, and there is a dedication on our side to do that.

Mr McPhillips: Irvinestown in particular is suffering from a lack of social housing provision. Can the Minister outline any plans that he has for the Irvinestown area and give assurances that he will instruct the Housing Executive to urgently undertake a review of the area?

Mr Givan: I will be happy to take that issue up on the Member's behalf in respect of Irvinestown.

It is the Housing Executive that ultimately needs to look at these areas and work with housing associations to deliver social housing. I am happy to raise the Member's specific point with the Housing Executive on his behalf, and I will correspond with the Member.

3.30 pm

Urban Regeneration

T9. **Ms Ní Chuilín** asked the Minister for Communities to review recent correspondence that he sent in relation to an urban regeneration scheme, given that his colleagues in the Housing Executive are perhaps giving local residents a different impression of the status of that scheme and his clarification would be helpful. (AQT 494/16-21)

Mr Givan: I will be happy to follow up with the Member on the specifics of the urban regeneration scheme. I am keen that we support communities, particularly when it comes to the Department's urban regeneration responsibilities, because I recognise their value to a community and believe that the Executive can do more on that. I hope to touch on the issue in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up for topical questions.

Assembly Business

Mrs Long: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the course of Question Time, the Minister, I think, inadvertently misled the Chamber with respect to our position on 50:50 recruitment for policing. It is not the case that Alliance supported 50:50 recruitment at any time for policing, and, indeed, it was our Minister who withdrew that provision. I would like you, Mr Deputy Speaker, to review Hansard and perhaps give the Minister the opportunity to set the record straight.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): While it is not a point of order, it is a point of information. Should the Minister wish to adversely challenge that or otherwise, that is up to him.

Mr Givan: I understand that the Alliance Party can be very precious about the finer details at times, but my understanding is that the Alliance Party supported the Patten report.

Mrs Long: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Is this a point of order?

Mrs Long: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, there is a serious issue here with respect to the fact that these are not matters of political opinion but matters of fact. The party did not support 50:50 recruitment. For the Minister to continue to insist that that is the case is now a deliberate attempt to mislead people in the Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): While it is not a point of order, it is a point of accuracy, and you have now twice had the opportunity to put your point of accuracy clearly on the record.

Dr Farry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a different point of order about Standing Order 20(8). While, obviously, respecting the option for the Speaker to act with his discretion in such matters, could I seek clarity for the House on the relevance of supplementary questions? Question 5 to the Minister for Communities referred specifically to Ulster GAA and Casement Park. A supplementary question about Windsor Park was permitted from Mr Stalford but one was not permitted from my colleague Mr Lyttle about The Oval. Furthermore, question 6 was specifically about the Ulster Fleadh —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Could the Member get to his point?

Dr Farry: — in Bangor, and a supplementary was taken on marching bands. Could I ask the Deputy Speaker to reflect on the consistency of the approach that was adopted today and maybe come back to the House to provide further guidance to all Members so that we can better frame our questions in light of the guidance from the Chair?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Those matters will be reflected on as to their relevance as points of order, and the Member will receive a response from the Speaker.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, is it in order for a Member to rise on a point of information?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): For clarification, it was not on a point of information. It was described as a "point of order", and I have to listen to it to determine if, in fact, it is a point of order. That is how the Member described it.

On that point, we have no further issues, so can Members please take their ease while the Chair changes?

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Mr Speaker: Members, I want to return to a point made by Ms Armstrong and Mr Dickson yesterday in relation to the written statement made by the Minister for Infrastructure on the York Street interchange project. I believe the situation yesterday was unusual, in that a written statement had been provided to Members for a sitting day and that its embargo overlapped with questions to the Minister. It would seem to me that this is not the scenario that our rulings on written statements envisaged and that the intention was never to impede discussion by Members on the Floor. There are times when I may accept a question for urgent oral answer as an appropriate way to address a situation where Ministers have not brought issues to the House. However, there are also occasions when I will not accept a question for urgent oral answer because it would be reasonable for me to expect Members to raise the issue when the Minister is in the House for questions. In this case, the embargo yesterday may have disadvantaged Members from using the opportunity of Question Time to raise an issue that they had expressed an interest in. I am, therefore, using my discretion to accept the question for urgent oral answer and give that chance today.

Finally, as it is relevant to these circumstances, Members may be interested to know that I have already asked officials to work on new rulings for my consideration on Matters of the Day and questions for urgent oral answer. It is my intention to issue those rulings for our return in the new year in order to give Members greater awareness of the issues that I intend to take account of in the context of this mandate. I have to warn that this does not mean that Members will not be disappointed sometimes as the rulings will still have to be within the scope of current Standing Orders. However, that raises the point again that there are longer-term issues for the whole House in improving our parliamentary culture.

I want to proceed with the two questions for urgent oral answer, so I do not intend to take any points of order on the issue now. Let us move on.

Infrastructure

York Street Interchange Project

Mr Speaker: Ms Kellie Armstrong has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for Infrastructure. I remind Members that, if they wish to speak or to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following his acceptance of the public inquiry and decision to progress, for an update on the York Street interchange project.

Mr Hazzard (The Minister for Infrastructure): I have just announced the publication of the public inquiry inspector's report, departmental statement and notice to proceed. That allows officials to begin consultation with key stakeholders, including the local community, in line with the recommendations in the inspector's report.

The scheme will address a major bottleneck in the strategic road network, replacing the existing signalised junction at York Street with direct links between the Westlink, the M2 and the M3, three of our busiest roads in the North. It will also separate strategic traffic from local traffic movements.

The inspector appointed to chair the inquiry to examine the case for and against the scheme concluded that the case to replace the existing York Street junction had been demonstrated. The procurement process for the scheme is well advanced and was progressed in parallel with the statutory processes. The appointment of a contractor would aid discussions with the local communities on the impacts of the construction process. However, I will need to consider the funding for the project, together with other priorities, as part of my budget 2017-2021 considerations before deciding whether to award the York Street interchange contract. The scheme remains a priority for me, and I am committed to do all that I can to deliver it in the current financial context, working with the Finance Minister and other Executive colleagues.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much for your clarity. It is good to see the Minister here and to hear his update. What criteria will be used to prioritise other road-building schemes over the York Street interchange? Can you clarify just

where it is in the priorities? You said in your statement that York Street was a priority but there is no money for it, and others are proceeding.

Mr Hazzard: On a point of clarity, I do not think that anywhere in my statement I said that there was no money for York Street; I said that, going forward, it has to fit within a programme of works and we need to do more to ensure not just that we have the funding to start a project but have funding in place to the end.

As regards the criteria for road schemes, I have four infrastructure flagship projects that are agreed by the Executive: the A5, the A6, the Belfast transport hub and Belfast rapid transit (BRT). Those are the four infrastructure priorities for the Executive, but that is not to take away from the fact that there are other large-scale projects, such as the York Street interchange, the Newry southern relief road, the Ballynahinch bypass, the Cookstown bypass, the Enniskillen bypass, the Narrow Water bridge, investment in public transport and billions of pounds of investment in our water infrastructure. There are huge demands on the infrastructure budget, and they are all competing. It is my job and that of my Department to put our priorities in place so that we can deliver as much as we can with the finances that are available to us and can do that strategically in the years ahead.

Mrs Palmer: I welcome the Minister's statement. What a difference a month makes in policy and direction. Can he give assurances that, when he meets the Chancellor on Brexit implications, the York Street interchange will be at the top of his priorities?

Mr Hazzard: As I just outlined to the previous Member, I have a number of competing priorities with the four Executive flagship projects. Last week, we saw the launch of the consultation on the Belfast transport hub. I will go to mid-Ulster tomorrow, where top of the agenda will, no doubt, be the Cookstown bypass and progression of the A5 and the A6. Everybody inside the Chamber will have different priorities. I have no doubt the Member would love to raise the possibility of a Sprucefield bypass with the Chancellor if she had the opportunity. We all have competing priorities. Certainly, as a Department, we now have to put in place a programme of works that meets the needs of the economy but does so in a regionally balanced way so that, whenever I say that I will address the infrastructure deficit, particularly in the west, I mean what I say. Projects such as the A5 and A6 maintain

priority with me, as does the Belfast hub and BRT, but that is not to suggest that we will not have any money at all for other projects. Of course, I want to be in a position to deliver the likes of the York Street interchange.

I know that other Members have suggested — you are hinting at and alluding to this — that Belfast is somehow being neglected all of a sudden and that this priority in the west is taking over, which, again, is not true. I will spend more money in Belfast than in any other town, city or village in the years ahead. Belfast sits primed to receive money for BRT, the Belfast hub, investment in water infrastructure — whatever it may be. Let Members be assured that we will not forget Belfast in the years ahead.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House. I welcome his acceptance of the public inquiry's findings. The York Street interchange is absolutely vital in connecting Northern Ireland, the port of Belfast, the M2 and M3 with west Ulster and our airports. It is hugely important for business, particularly the haulage industry and tourism. Now that the case has been demonstrated, procurement is well advanced, negotiations with the EU are ongoing and assurances have been given by the Treasury in London, when will the Minister be in a position to come to the House and tell us that work will start on the York Street interchange?

Mr Hazzard: Like many in the House, I hope I will be in a position to do that in the coming weeks and months. The Member made reference, obviously, to assurances that the British Treasury believes it has made on a number of projects. I am yet to be convinced, having met the British Secretary of State and others. One assurance, however, from the British Treasury that I am very aware of is the wave of austerity that is coming our direction for the next five years or longer. That will put huge strain on my Department as well as others. We have seen the effects of austerity to this point. There is nothing to suggest it will not be the same, if not worse, in the years ahead.

Those are the sorts of considerations that I have to take into account when I am putting together my programme of works for the years ahead.

3.45 pm

Mr Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I welcome the decision that

has been made to make progress on this very important project. Bearing in mind what he said about funding, I hope that the Minister will agree that there is an opportunity to consult further with the residents in the area, who are most affected by the project. They have some concerns about the plans that they have seen. I do not think that it would be a big effort to make the adjustments necessary so that the project goes ahead with less impact on the local residents.

Mr Hazzard: Absolutely. Aside from banking the progress to date, the written ministerial statement enables my Department to move ahead and engage with the local community, as set out by one of the recommendations in the report, and also to examine ways to increase the amount of cycling provision that any new infrastructure at the junction has. Engaging with the community is very important. We now have the potential to realign the road away from Little Georges Street and look at antisocial behaviour at the steps on North Queen Street. There is also a need for sympathetic treatment of the McGurk's bar memorial, together with architectural landscaping enhancements to local structures and the rear of properties at Little Georges Street. All of that work is vital. Making the statement today allows my Department to re-engage with the community and take that forward in the months ahead.

Ms Mallon: Why did the Minister cite Brexit as the reason initially for putting the project on hold, given the commitment from the UK Treasury to fund any structural projects awarded EU funding beyond the point of any Brexit?

Mr Hazzard: I never once announced that the project was on hold. What I said was that the procurement process for the project had been lengthened, which allowed me to take stock of the financial and geopolitical situation that we now face. The Member will no doubt admit that we are in very uncertain political and financial times.

The Member also flagged up assurances. The first available opportunity for me to apply for European funding for the project is at some point in 2018. We are not yet sure of when that will be in 2018, but we can be sure of one thing: article 50 will be triggered long before 2018. It will probably be triggered at least a year before I can even apply for any European funds whatsoever. The Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) fund is highly competitive — member states have to fight and compete with one another to win the funds. There is nothing to

suggest that we will be successful. The likelihood of the EU funding a project in a region that is in the mouth of leaving the EU through Brexit is highly unlikely. As I said, that is only 40%. I do not think that the assurances that we have received from the British Treasury stand up to that. There is also 60% that has to be found.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for coming to the House today. How can you justify your failure to prioritise the busiest road junction in Northern Ireland? For most people in the House, it is, on any scale or standard, the single most important infrastructure project that you should have on your desk.

Mr Hazzard: The Member might have missed the news: today I announced that that infrastructure project will proceed. If that is not giving priority, I do not know what is.

It is clear that the Alliance Party does not have any political reps outside of Belfast. When I go around the North and speak to people in Derry, Enniskillen, Strabane, Omagh and different places, they tell me that they want other areas and projects to be prioritised. They have waited for decades for roads like the A5 and the A6. Motorways stop in places like Craigavon and Randalstown for no particular reason. The allusion that the Member makes is entirely false.

Mr E McCann: Can the Minister confirm that the construction of the York Street scheme, whenever it begins, will not be delayed by being divided into three phases, like, for example, the A6 motorway or the railway from Coleraine to Derry?

Mr Hazzard: There is no doubt that it is one of the busiest junctions that we have here in the North. Any construction process will have to be done in tandem with the huge amount of vehicles going through the junction. It will have to be managed very carefully.

I have no doubt that the issues that the Member raised will be part of the discussion with officials and engineers as we decide the best way forward with the construction works.

Mr Allister: I trust that this statement means that the Minister has got over his hissy fit of scaremongering about this project. The Chancellor has been very clear. He said that he will promise to underwrite EU funding for all projects signed off before Brexit. He could not do anything more, and yet the Minister said in his statement:

"I believe this does not go far enough."

What does he want?

Mr Hazzard: I said that there are two parts to this. The first part that we certainly want is an end to the austerity that has been crippling departmental budgets for many years — *[Interruption.]* The Members might tut, but they know full well what austerity is doing to communities, not just here but throughout Britain.

The second point is, and I have touched on this with Members previously, that the assurances talk about projects that are signed off before Brexit. We do not know — we just saw today in the news that the British Cabinet do not even know what is happening — but, in all likelihood, Brexit is going to be at some stage in early 2019. The earliest that I can even apply for any European funding is some point in 2018. It may take a year or it may take months before that is signed off. The uncertainty around this is not imaginary or part of a hissy fit. As I said, I want to progress with this project, but I am not going to put funds into a project that I do not have enough money to complete.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he, as much as possible, ensure that local contractors will be employed to build this very important roads project that will also benefit the local construction industry?

Mr Hazzard: Absolutely. Obviously, we will go through a tendering process, and the procurement processes are advancing well, as I have outlined. There is no doubt that, when we invest such a serious amount of money into construction works, it has a very good knock-on effect. Every £1 that is invested in construction projects creates a £4 knock-on effect for the local economy. There is no doubt that this project, like many others, will have a knock-on effect, and we will be investing hundreds of millions of pounds in the years ahead on these projects. This will have a great effect on the local economy and our local construction industry.

Mr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his comments so far. Thank you very much indeed for the U-turn; it is excellent. One of the issues that I would like to raise and ask a question on is that, obviously, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, the CBI and virtually every business organisation in Northern Ireland see this as a vital piece of infrastructure. This is not a question of infrastructure for Belfast, it is for all of Northern Ireland and, indeed, all of Ireland

north of Drogheda. Will the Minister, when he is putting together his priorities, ensure that the York Street interchange is up there with the A6, the A5 and the other priorities?

Mr Hazzard: As the Member has just outlined, we have the A5, the A6 and the other priorities; the list is endless. I engage regularly with the CBI and others and, alongside talking about projects such as the York Street interchange, they talk about the southern relief. More often than not, when it comes to the roads, they talk about the massive investment that is needed in water and waste water infrastructure and energy security, and, obviously, the Minister for the Economy will be dealing with a number of issues there.

There are a huge amount of priorities. There are more priorities than we have money for. That is why, when I make reference to the need for the British Treasury to end the wave of austerity that is crippling our budgets, again, this is not scaremongering politics or hissy fits; this is a reality. Our budgets are under serious pressure. They have been for a long number of years, and they look set to be under more pressure in the years ahead. I say to the Member — I know he has colleagues at Westminster now — that we should use our collective power as elected representatives to send the united message that we need to protect our budgets and we need to see stimulus. It is not enough that we see a capital stimulus; we cannot see the constant attack on our resource budgets, and they must let us get on with building regional growth for all our people.

As I said, I engage regularly with the CBI and the business community. The message is very clear: as well as projects such as the A5 and the A6, we need serious investment in our water infrastructure and other projects. I only wish that I had all the money to deliver all these projects.

Health

Mental Health Waiting Times

Mr Speaker: Mr Mark Durkan has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what action she will take to address the unfolding crisis in mental health waiting times in every health and social care trust across Northern Ireland.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Health): I am grateful for the opportunity to address this important issue today. Compared with other regions, we have a higher than average prevalence of mental health issues, and it is that, together with an increased awareness of psychological therapies and a legacy of unmet need, that has contributed to increased waiting times. Since I was appointed, I have consistently said that mental health is one of my key priorities. I have been working hard to identify the needs and the gaps in services to be addressed and to formulate a plan for action.

The draft delivery plan for the Programme for Government improving mental health indicator is out to consultation until next month, and it recognises that psychological therapies is an area that needs further investment, together with a wide range of specialist services, such as perinatal mental health. It currently envisages that it will take five years at the very least for us to start to see an appreciable movement in mental health on a population level. A 10-year programme is probably more realistic.

I have adopted six principles to improve mental health, with a first step of committing to a move towards parity of esteem to ensure that mental health receives the time, effort and resources required to meet local needs. Of the £10 million that is invested in psychological therapies, around £2 million is invested in the development of primary-care talking therapy hubs. I acknowledge that a further £3 million is needed to complete the programme. At the moment, nine hubs are operational across the region, providing treatment and care at a community level to over 7,000 people. A further five hubs are in development. Recovery colleges have also been established in each trust area. I also allocated a further £180,000 to continue the development of a comprehensive mental trauma service, which is based on the psychological therapies stepped care mode. When fully established, it will employ over 40 specialist staff.

Clearly, we face a challenging budgetary situation. Although I am actively making the case for more money for mental health, it is incumbent on us all to get the best value for the money that we already spend, and that is why the board is working up proposals for a managed care network to better utilise existing expertise across trusts and to promote

uniformity and better continuity of care. That also demonstrates why fundamental reshaping of the health and social care service is so vital. It will enable money to be released across the system so that it can be targeted at those areas that need it most.

I am fully aware of the significant mental health challenges that face us. I am committed to improving services. It will be a long-term effort and, given the current budgetary position, there will be a need to prioritise. It is also important to note that, even if all the money required right across mental health services was immediately available, there would be a delay in utilising it fully, given the need to recruit highly skilled staff.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer. We have heard much from the Minister about how she will prioritise mental health, but, given the health service authorities are saying that they now need about 160 additional staff to deal with mental health pressures, what action has she taken to recruit staff in that area? What action has she taken to support external organisations, many of them unfunded, that provide services and support to people in their darkest hours?

Mrs O'Neill: I will pick up on your point about external organisations first. I presume, for example, that you are referring to the community and voluntary sector. Earlier today, I had a meeting with the Niamh Louise Foundation, which I am sure the Member is aware of. It provides excellent services in the community, and its staff will quite often describe themselves as being first-aiders when dealing with mental health issues and people who feel suicidal. We have to continue and enhance the role that we have across government, and also with the community and voluntary sector, in order to tackle successfully mental health issues in our society.

There are a number of issues that I need to tackle, and a number of factors point to the current state of play, particularly the fact that we have a legacy of underinvestment in our mental health services, which is something that we need to address over time. Doing that will be particularly challenging, given the budgetary issues that we have to deal with.

There is an increasing demand for services and a recognition that psychological therapies are an excellent way of supporting people. That means that more people are aware of psychological therapies and that more people

are requesting them and being referred for them. That is a good thing.

4.00 pm

The board has set out its stall in relation to the challenges that we have in recruiting staff. That is not just symptomatic of issues in mental health but right across health and social care. All those factors have led to a situation where we have a long way to go to improve mental health services. I said that it is a priority for me and that it is an issue that I want to champion and run with.

Just last week, I received the evaluation of the Bamford review, which looks back over the last 10 years at how the Executive and all Departments have worked to improve services for people with mental health problems. It has pointed to a number of gaps in services and where we need to do better. I will use that work, and when we put that together with the recent work commissioned by the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Lord Crisp's review, we have a real body of evidence that points to what we need to do differently.

As I said, I intend to set out, in line with the Programme for Government indicator, how we transform mental health services in the years ahead. We will have to do it incrementally, and I think that we can do that. I always say that a lot of good things are happening in the health service, but we have a long way to go in terms of challenging where we need to do things better. We have the information and the evidence that allows us to support a case to transform mental health services in future.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far and Mr Durkan for tabling the urgent oral question. I want to follow up on his question about the community and voluntary sector. I attended the greater Shankill suicide and self-harm reference group meeting in the Hammer community centre in the greater Shankill area. The people there talked about their local community response plan, which works very well when someone presents at an emergency department (ED) who has attempted suicide. The response plan goes in, looks after the community and the family concerned, and builds up a rapport. However, they suggested that maybe our EDs need to look at this slightly differently, given the fact that today's report states that nearly 16,500 people presented at EDs, some of whom had been admitted more than once. Maybe we need to look at our EDs as well to see whether referrals can be made to local community response

teams, which are doing invaluable work in their communities. They are not there just to pick up the pieces after a suicide; they are there to assist in stopping people committing suicide.

Mrs O'Neill: That is exactly the approach that we need to adopt. Often, a lot of people will not even present to an ED but will go to people they know in the local community group that is involved in supporting people with mental health problems. I had a very similar experience in relation to understanding the work that they do. There is certainly a role for the community and voluntary sector.

In terms of shaping our services, we have just finished the consultation on the Protect Life strategy — the suicide strategy. One of the things that is very strong in that is the need to work with the community and voluntary sector. I am very open to strengthening how things happen and how the statutory agencies interact with the community and voluntary sector, because they have a role to play. I always say now that no one has the option of working in silos; we all have to work together. If we are all serious about delivering better outcomes for people with mental health problems, I know that the community and voluntary sector is up for that.

In relation to EDs, we should always keep that under review. A number of years ago, after a campaign by families that had been bereaved, the "card before you leave" system was brought into play. There are simple things that can make a real difference, and it was a lifeline for some families. We need to do more such things, but the only way to learn about them is by talking to service users — the people with lived experience who have needed the support of the health service. We have a lot of lessons to learn, but the evaluation of the Bamford review points to all the gaps that are there, and I want to work with the Health Committee and all Members to put plans in place to improve things across the piece. Clearly, whilst the Programme for Government indicator talks about a five-year plan, the feedback that I am getting from health professionals and others who work in the field is that we need to chart a way forward — similar to Delivering Together — for the next 10 years so that we can start to improve things.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for attending today. The largest share in breaches of psychological therapy services over recent months was recorded in my own trust, the South Eastern Trust. In August, for instance, the South Eastern Trust accounted for 773 of the 1,798 patients forced to wait longer than 13

weeks. Will she detail specifically what steps she is taking to close the widening gap of unmet need and funding for psychological therapies in my constituency?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I will not get into specifics in relation to the South Eastern Trust in this debate but I am very happy for the trust to pick that up directly with the Member in relation to what it is doing operationally.

The same things that I have just said actually stand for every trust. We have to get to the point where you get the same access to services no matter where you live in the North. It is unfortunate that at this moment in time, depending on where you live, you may have better access to psychological therapies, and that is what we are talking about today. That is not acceptable to me. We need to have a regional standard. We need to make sure that you have full access no matter where you live.

We have a psychological strategy in place. Clearly, there is a recognition that psychological therapies work. They actually take pressure off the acute end of mental health services. They are giving people first-aid. They are talking to people from very early on, and maybe preventing them from having to move through further areas of the health service.

I recognise that we need to do more of this, and I am actively engaged in conversations with the Finance Minister on how we can fund psychological therapies in the future. I believe in them. I believe they are the right thing to do. I believe they work and in terms of doing more — we have to do more — we have a certain level of investment, which has been very positive, but we certainly have a long way to go to improve the picture for absolutely everybody who may need psychological therapies.

Ms Seeley: I thank the Minister for being here to discuss this important issue. What consideration has she given to the principles that will inform her plans for tackling mental ill health?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, we are at an opportune time as we have the Bamford evaluation but, first and foremost, the commitment has to be about moving towards parity of esteem. I have said that I am firmly committed to moving towards parity of esteem.

Secondly, it is really important that we develop and sustain a recovery culture. Whenever I talked, in the last number of weeks, about how we are going to transform health and social

care, one of the things I talked about was co-designing services and planning services along with patients, carers and families. This is an area where mental health is already ahead of the field. Recovery colleges have been established and they are really practical examples of how people with lived experience — those who have had mental health problems — have actually helped to design and improve services and work with others who find themselves in the same scenario. They have then been employed by trusts to provide those services. I want to do a lot more of that in pursuing and enhancing the recovery culture which we have.

Thirdly, involvement by people, as I said, with lived experience is key.

The fourth principle is around service development where our resources allow us to do so. We are going to have to prioritise. We do not have an unlimited pot of money. We are going to have to prioritise services and what we take forward. So, let us make sure that every service that we invest in is about delivering better health outcomes and making a meaningful difference. Over the time ahead, we are going to have decisions to make to plug the gaps between needs and service provision, but the Bamford review is really key in pointing out some of the areas where we need to do more.

I am particularly interested in making sure we do more to support young people, particularly those with a dual diagnosis. I want to do more to establish a regional perinatal service for people with mental illness. I want to do more around eating disorder services, psychological therapies, mental trauma and personality disorders. There are so many things that are key and really important which we need to do, but we need to come at it from a planned system change point of view and that is going to take a bit of time to do. What is most important is that we work collectively — community and voluntary sector and government — to make sure that we provide first-class services for those people when they need them.

I said that waiting lists are always unacceptable. The length of time that some people are waiting for services across health and social care is totally unacceptable to me. That continues to be the case, and when I publish the plan for how I am going to bring elective care under control, in January, I will look forward to discussing with Members of the House how we can improve that picture.

Ms S Bradley: While the question today rightly looks at the out-and-out failure to meet the 13-week target, I express to the Minister my shock at finding out that anybody living with a mental health issue would have to wait 13 weeks, let alone that the target has not been met. Is the Minister satisfied that this is an acceptable target?

Mrs O'Neill: I was not shocked, and I do not think that the Member should be shocked. We all know that there is a legacy of underinvestment in mental health services. I do not know how aware you are of mental health services and how they are delivered but, certainly, it is no shock to me that there is a waiting list. It is no shock to me that we need to invest more in mental health services. It is no shock to me that we need to invest in all those areas which I have just highlighted, areas where we need to do more.

We have a very challenging situation and, as I said in the first answer I gave, there is a legacy of underinvestment and increased demand for services. Psychological therapies are working, so people want them, and rightly so. We have a big demand on our service and we need to deliver for the people who need our service.

Do not be shocked, but be assured that I am doing everything I can to make sure that we change the services that we provide. I am doing everything I can, along with Executive colleagues and the Finance Minister, to make sure that we deliver the funding that we need to invest in psychological therapies.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. I welcome your praise for the community and voluntary sector in dealing with the issue and your commitment to review mental health psychological and therapeutic support services. As part of that review, you will find that there is no counselling or support for people under 16 who are the victims of sexual crime. If you could look at that in your review, I would really welcome it.

The organisations that plug the gaps where there is no provision are very reliant on core revenue funding from your Department. As you know, they have a year-on-year increase, so I ask you to look at bringing forward the innovation fund as quickly as possible so that we do not lose the community and voluntary sector services that are so vital to addressing the mental health issue.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. I do not have a full understanding of

the services for victims of sexual crime, but I will certainly look into it and make sure that that is included in taking things forward.

You are absolutely right about core funding: the community and voluntary sector does excellent work. The health service has given some core funding for that in the past, but it is probably nowhere near what it takes for them to run the services. If the health service tried to do that itself, it would find itself stretched to the limit. We have to recognise the excellent work that is out there in the community and voluntary sector. The previous Minister obviously decided to end core funding and develop an innovation scheme. I am still looking at that because I wanted to take a fresh look at the organisations that we fund, some of which may disappear. I am fearful, particularly in relation to advocacy, about how those groups will be supported in the future, and I am considering that. I want to get the innovation fund out the door because I know that people are very anxious, given the decrease in their funding over the last number of weeks. I intend at least to initiate the applications for the innovation fund before the end of the financial year to allow people to bid in. Alongside that, I am looking at whether there is any potential or scope to support the community and voluntary sector and the particular groups that we need, because we know the value that they bring to all the people who use their services.

Mr Carroll: Given that, according to the Health and Social Care Board, an additional £17 million will be needed to keep up with the demand in mental health services, will the Minister give a guarantee that the money will be found and, if so, say from where?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that I have answered that. I am doing absolutely everything I can to work with the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues to make sure that we have proper funding for our mental health services. It is not without its challenges. There is Tory austerity; I could list all the issues that we have to deal with. We do not have an unlimited pot of funding, but we have a commitment to parity of esteem. We have a legacy of underfunding in mental health; I want to change that picture and am committed to doing that. I will work with Executive colleagues throughout the Budget process and will not be found wanting when it comes to shouting and fighting hard to make sure that we have an adequate budget for health and social care in general and, in particular, as in this case today, to address the issues that we have with psychological therapy itself.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. She will be aware that there has been an increase in the number of children and young people presenting with mental health issues; it is as many as one in nine. Will she look at what specialist services — she touched on eating disorders and addressing that issue — are being provided to help to address that worrying trend?

Mrs O'Neill: Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are delivered under a stepped care model. The board leads on a reform process under the auspices of the stepped care model implementation review. A lot of progress has been made, but you are right: more young people have been referred to our services. We always have to adapt to the needs of society. If more younger people are coming in, we need more emphasis on CAMHS. I am committed to making sure that we do that. We invest over £20 million annually in CAMHS. That shows that there is a recognition that we need to put the funding there to support those young people. I am also considering reforming investment options across a range of other services, including CAMHS. As I said, it is important that we look at children and young people with a dual diagnosis, for example. We do not have a service to support those families, and perhaps we need to look at that. If we cannot do it here, let us look at it on an all-island basis. Is it something we can provide on the island? It is so important that young people know there are services to support them so that they do not feel they have nowhere to go. I am keen to make sure we do that.

4.15 pm

The regional acute inpatient services at Beechcroft are frequently under pressure, and I think Members are aware of that. An independent review in 2014 concluded that the current 33-bed model was appropriate but that, crucially, it was dependent on the further strengthening of the crisis resolution and home treatment services. What else can we put into the community that stops people having to go into acute inpatient settings? That is an area we need to focus on.

I should also say that a managed care network for acute child and adolescent mental health services is being established as we speak. That will bring acute services into one managed system and, again, will ensure greater consistency across the region and streamline access to Beechcroft.

It is an area we have to do an awful lot more in, but the Bamford evaluation points to those issues, the service gaps we have and where we need to do a lot more. This is certainly one of those key areas.

Mr Milne: Will the Minister give an update on the suicide prevention strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: The consultation has closed; however, I have said that I want to go out and engage personally. I have met a number of organisations and individuals about the strategy. I intend to go out next week, and I am doing consultation events in Belfast and the Dungannon area. It is important that I listen to the people who have been bereaved by suicide and make sure that I develop a strategy that very much has their views, ideas and initiatives embedded when going forward. We will work on that over the next number of months and collate the responses we have received. As I said, it is really important that we listen to those with lived experience.

Mr Ford: As I remember questioning the Minister's predecessor Bairbre de Brún on funding for mental health services about 14 or 15 years ago, it is rather sad that Mr Durkan had to ask a question today to illustrate the problem. Given that the Minister has referred a few times to the Bamford review, can she give us any information on the commencement of the Mental Capacity Act?

Mrs O'Neill: Surely the Member is not blaming Bairbre de Brún for all the issues we have in mental health in our society. We are a society coming out of conflict, which is an issue in itself, but we obviously have a prevalence issue that continues to rise with young people and mental health issues and more people being referred to the service. We have a societal problem. I do not think we can pinpoint it on one area; we have a societal problem that we need to address. We need to address it across every Department, council or community and voluntary sector organisation that wants to get involved. Do people have access to a job? Do they have a home? All those things contribute to people's mental well-being. We have a collective responsibility as an Executive and a society to help people who find themselves with mental health issues.

The Member will be very aware that the Act is a very complex piece of legislation. We are working our way through all the issues as we speak. Officials in my Department and in DOJ are working through all the initiatives, because, when we commence the Act, we need to make

sure we can deliver on it. From his previous role as a Minister, the Member will be very aware of the challenges we have with the Mental Capacity Act. It was significant legislation, so it is important that we have everything lined up and can deliver everything when we commence the legislation.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease while we change the top Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Nurture Provision

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly welcomes the report by the Centre for Evidence and Social Innovation at Queen's University Belfast, entitled 'The Impact and Cost Effectiveness of Nurture Groups in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland'; welcomes the commitment of the Minister of Education to continuing to fund the 32 nurture units across Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Education to examine potential options to mainstream nurture provision within the current education budget. — [Lord Morrow.]

Which amendments were:

No 1: Leave out all after the second "Northern Ireland;" and insert

"recognises the role effective early years interventions can play in reducing the need for nurture units; and calls on the Minister of Education to examine potential options to develop universal early years education provision." — [Mr Agnew.]

No 2: Leave out all after the second "Northern Ireland;" and insert

"and, as recommended in the report by Queen's University, calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that a sustainable funding model is put in place for the longer-term viability of nurture group provision, to plan the further expansion of nurture provision in each primary school sector targeted in the areas of greatest need, to develop appropriate training for staff and to conduct research into models for the delivery of nurture provision." — [Mr McGrath.]

Mr Allister: Unaccustomed as I am to commending government projects, I have to say that my experience of the nurture project is very positive.

I think that it has been most successful, where it has been allowed to operate, in reaching out to those in greatest need.

In my constituency, we sadly only have one nurture project, at Harryville Primary School. We have some adjacent ones. There is a very successful one at Ballycraig Primary School, and there is quite a good one at Harpur's Hill in Coleraine. It seems that these projects have been successful in inducing in the kids better behaviour, more interest in school — some may be coming from a background where that is not overly encouraged — and, indeed, interest in the joys of education through improving their reading capacity and all those things. So the pilot schemes that have taken place, from what I hear of them, appear to have been quite good. I am relying almost more on the anecdotal evidence that I hear from my constituents than on the very positive report from Queen's University.

One of the criticisms — it is not to do with the delivery of the project and those who deliver it — is to do with the drip feed nature of the funding. It was delivered under Delivering Social Change. The Department of Education was just the conduit for passing on the money, meaning it had to wait for the release of the money from OFMDFM, as it then was, and then it passed it on. That drip feed is the core problem with going forward with the project and putting it on a stable footing. We are not talking about a lot of money. When you think that the commitment to each nurture unit was of the order of £70,000, and that multiples of that are often spent with little apparent effect, it seems to be giving a good return for the spend. It is not that hard to establish it. It obviously needs a room kitted out, a teacher and probably a classroom assistant but, after that, its demands are relatively modest. Therefore, I would be very supportive of the idea of expanding that provision within the mainstream. That can only be positive.

One of the most distressing and saddening things for anyone who has any relationship with education is to see kids pass through the system, knowing that they are not taking the best out of it, maybe not being encouraged from home and elsewhere to take the best out of it, and not achieving their full potential — in fact, becoming alienated from the education system, whereas education should be the door to the world for all of us. It is by going through that

door and experiencing it that we move on to greater things and make a really worthwhile contribution to society. Trying to capture a sector of our kids who are lagging behind can only be a good thing. Therefore, I encourage the Minister to be bold in advancing the scheme and mainstreaming the funding so that it has certainty and can progress to attain the ends in even greater form to what it has already attained.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): Minister, you have 15 minutes.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank Members for their contributions today. It has been a very productive debate. We have found ourselves largely in vigorous agreement. Indeed, when even Mr Allister commends the Government, we should ring the date on the calendar. I thank him for his words as well. I have taken a keen interest in nurture since my days on the Education Committee. It has always been an issue that Members have recognised as an effective means of supporting our most vulnerable children. Indeed, just before I came to office, I visited a primary school in Slate Street in west Belfast and Rathcoole Primary, and, last week, I had the opportunity to go to Harryville Primary. I think Northern Ireland has a total of seven Boxall awards, which is more or less the national award for nurture, and Harryville received it last week. I think that, as Mr Allister said, the impact, not just on the children themselves but on the whole school, is demonstrably beneficial.

In case there was any indication or any belief that there is any level of criticism of other schools, I will say that, in general, I think that our schools offer themselves as very caring and supportive places. I commend them for the good work that they do. Irrespective of whether they are directly involved in a nurture project, schools do a great deal to nurture children. However, it is clear that some children need extra help, and that is where nurture groups come in.

Several Members outlined what nurture groups are and the basis on which they operate, so I will not delay proceedings by reiterating that. I will simply note that the groups work with children from years 1 to 3 who are suffering with attainment difficulties by building their trust and self-confidence and, ultimately, equipping them with skills and strategies that, effectively, can put them back in mainstream classes. The reasons why children need nurture are varied and are often unaddressed but, in every case, these can lead to barriers to learning and long-term achievement. Preventing that waste of

opportunity is what nurture is for. As a number of Members have mentioned, it is a financial investment, because there is a certain level of investing to save, and a particular investment in human capital.

On the progress of this scheme, initially, 20 nurture groups were set up under the Executive's Delivering Social Change programme. This was jointly delivered by Education and DSD, and it was then extended to establish another 10 and then another two nurture groups. When Delivering Social Change funding ended in 2015, DFP provided support through its change fund, and the Department of Finance has recently provided additional resources to the two Irish-medium schools. I put on record my thanks for all of the support for this. While these efforts precede the Children's Services Co-operation Act, I think that they exemplify its intent that Departments should work together to deliver for children. As a result of these collective efforts, over 700 children have attended a nurture group, with 800 additional children receiving short-term support during crisis situations.

We have heard a great deal about the recent Queen's University evaluation. That was a very robust study that showed that the groups were successful in supporting children who were previously struggling to cope in school. It highlighted particular benefits for looked-after children and children involved with social services, two highly vulnerable groups. It found that nurture groups were cost-effective and had a real potential to reduce the need for long-term educational, health, social services and justice interventions.

As well as referencing the Queen's University evaluation, Members referenced the ETI evaluation. Again, that showed a significant positive impact on children's social, emotional and behavioural development, building resilience and helping them to learn more effectively. ETI found that the new groups quickly became highly effective, and this gives me real confidence that the model can be equally effective in many other schools.

Today's motion asks that I commit my Department to building upon this success. I am happy to give that commitment. Coming to one of the points that Mr Allister made, I have already committed the Department to developing a new nurture programme, and, until that new nurture programme is put in place and we reach a point where that can be properly mainstreamed, funding will be sustained to the existing 32 groups. It is worth reflecting that Departments have already invested £8 million

in nurture. Several Members have already noted the benefits of nurture beyond education and that that contributes to several aspects of the new Programme for Government. I fully recognise this, and I have asked my officials to explore how a new programme can continue to build on this existing collaboration. Those conversations have already commenced.

The costs of nurture are not insignificant. Sustaining the 32 groups will cost the Department around £2.3 million. There will be challenges to the budget, but I will stand over my commitment to those 32 groups. The new PFG asks Departments to focus their efforts on outcomes rather than expenditure, targeting expenditure on those areas where they can deliver the greatest impact. In considering the Queen's University report, I could not ignore the fact that nurture has demonstrated that it is a proven, outcome-driven intervention that transforms children's lives.

For that reason, I can assure Members that I will be ambitious in planning for a new programme and vocal in fighting for the resources to deliver it.

4.30 pm

The shape of a new nurture programme is still to be determined, but I can confirm that the current nurture group model will sit at its heart. Where a nurture group is viable and sustainable, that model of delivery provides the best possible outcomes. I do not think that anyone can pretend that we can fund every school wishing to have a nurture group. I appreciate that Mrs Barton raised the issue of post-primary. If we were to mainstream it in all 1,000 schools, that would probably cost an extra £70 million. Evaluation has recommended that we should continue to target provision at schools with the greatest need. While no future selection criteria have been agreed, I want to make sure that they are based on comprehensive, objective and up-to-date data. Naturally, I will have regard to all the Department's statutory duties.

Several Members commented on the need to extend the reach of nurture provision as broadly as possible. One of the things that struck me very much when visiting schools was that the nurture unit is not just for the children who are directly involved; it creates a whole-school model. That will also be part of any future programme.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for giving way. I welcome the fact that he visited Harryville in my

constituency with us last week. I was proud to be the person who opened the Harryville nurture unit a number of years ago. I pay tribute to his officials, one of whom, who is in the House today, has worked extremely hard on the issue. Will the Minister make sure that nurture becomes mainstream in the school and is not something that is looked on as an isolated class in an isolated classroom?

Mr Weir: To be fair, the schools that have embraced nurture have very much taken that mainstreaming attitude. There is an issue about mainstreaming in the budget; there is also an issue about mainstreaming in the schools. I was reflecting the fact that there is a commonality of approach. For instance, schools have a sort of quiet room, which might not be a bad idea for us to adopt at Stormont.

Mr Storey: One or two might be in it.

Mr Weir: Yes. I will not ask whether the Member is intending to do that.

The projects receive specialist support. In future, that resource will be extended to any school that wants to consider a whole-school nurturing approach. It is also not simply about the schools that we provide the direct support and funding to but about ensuring that the experience is rolled out. Whatever the constraints, that will enable the benefits of nurture to be felt much more widely. There is still significant work to be undertaken, but I intend to bring forward plans for a new nurture programme next year and to have additional nurture groups operational by 2018-19.

I turn now to the two amendments. Amendment No 1 talks about the need to recognise the role of early years interventions in reducing the need for nurture units. I agree with a lot of what Mr Agnew said. That is the second time today, so I am a little worried. Whether that should worry him more than me, I do not know. I have some concerns, however, about the wording of his amendment. I cannot remember who made the point that a separate motion dealing with early years intervention might be a better way of dealing with it directly. I very much recognise the importance of early intervention. However, to tie that in directly with some belief that it will lead to a reduction in the need for nurture units is probably the wrong approach. There is not quite the same level of nexus.

There is universal provision in the preschool admissions process, where we have about 99.8%, but I appreciate the point that we need

to ensure that provision is there for the families that could most benefit from it. While wider nurture provision can only be helpful in adding to the mix of services, nurture groups are an important intervention in their own right. On that basis, it may not be ideal to tie the two together.

Both amendments have worthy intentions, but they are mutually exclusive, so the House can adopt only one or the other. From that point of view, amendment No 2, which stands in the names of members of the SDLP, is very much in the spirit of the original motion. It follows the direction of travel that I want to go in, so I am happy to support it.

I welcome this debate and all the positive contributions that we have heard. I will reflect on Members' comments as I develop my plans. Given the amount of agreement around the Chamber, I suspect that this issue may not lead the news tonight or feature on tomorrow morning's radio programmes. Maybe society is a bit the worse for that. However, I welcome what has been said. I have visited a number of nurture units, and I will do that on a continual basis. The only word that properly describes the difference that nurture makes to children's lives is "transforming." I believe that nurture classes have much more to offer our education system.

I am happy to endorse the motion and amendment No 2. I commend them to the House.

Mr Attwood: It is often the case that the simplest stories convey the most graphic truths. Some years ago, I went to see staff in a school in west Belfast. I went into a nurture class, and the school principal told me that the child to whom I was talking came to school not knowing how to handle a pen or pencil. Earlier in the debate, a Member gave the example of a child in a nurture class having to learn how to eat breakfast. Those stories are multiple, and all Members could tell them. They capture the essence of the challenge on the one hand and the value of nurture classes on the other. That is not least in the context of what was said to me by the principal of a school on the lower Falls, who told me a short time ago that the number of children at preschool and primary 1 who presented with challenges and multiple issues was greater than at any time in her working life. Therefore, the requirements of nurture and the care requirements of our young people from birth to six years, in particular, are more critical and acute than they have ever been.

In the spirit of the debate, the SDLP will support the Green amendment, if it is pressed, because we think that there is a need for a comprehensive approach. If that amendment is defeated, we call on all Members and parties to support the SDLP's amendment. That is the tone and tenor of the debate.

I take the point raised by Mr Lyttle that the requirements for nurture are not exclusive to areas of disadvantage. It is more concentrated in such areas for reasons that are captured in many reports, but it is not exclusive to them because there will be children in less disadvantaged areas who will have the struggles and the challenges of those in disadvantaged areas. In that spirit, I will explain the SDLP amendment. The reason why we proposed the amendment is that we should borrow from the Queen's University review of nurture and take forward explicitly its key recommendations: sustainable funding; expansion in each primary-school sector; developing appropriate training for staff; and conducting research into models of delivery. We think that that is a comprehensive approach. That is why we welcome the Minister's comments and those of other parties that they will endorse it.

My view — I have said this before, I think — is that the SDLP's first motion of this mandate was on childcare. The reason why the SDLP tabled that motion is that the paradigm shift of this mandate — we had that conversation with the Minister just last week — has to be to recognise that, for all the multiple interventions in the lives of children and in areas of need, it is the concentration of intervention from birth to age six that is the most critical, acute challenge that, in my view, faces the Assembly.

I am saying that in the context of the challenges of organised crime, paramilitarism and the health service. Of all the issues that touch on the lives of our people and the life of the Assembly, the most important challenge is a paradigm shift that sees the directing of resources and strategy into the lives of children from the moment of birth — indeed, from before being born — to the age of six. The Programme for Government, and government itself, should be measured against that standard.

The reason why this debate has been different in tone and character from others that we have had over the last number of months is the nature of the issue and the consensus of response in the Assembly. It is also because this Minister has taken the opportunity to recognise that those who speak from

Opposition Benches do not speak simply to oppose but to propose and create. That is the measure of this Minister, and I want to acknowledge that.

Mr Agnew: In front of us we have three complementary proposals. That has been reflected in the debate, which has been largely a discussion on how we maximise benefits for children. We have a consensus that we want to support children to achieve their potential; we have a consensus that nurture units work in that regard; and we have a consensus that there should be secure funding for existing nurture provision.

I put it to the Minister that whatever final wording is agreed today, and we sometimes take that as the be-all and end-all — what is cast in stone — he and his Department should take into account the whole debate rather than the final wording. I see that he is nodding his head. If we agree any more, our constituents are going to be very confused.

I think this shows that we are taking an evidence-based report from Queen's University, and the evidence on early years, as I mentioned, from Professor Heckman, Dr Suzanne Zeedyk and others.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Absolutely.

Mr Storey: Will the Member accept that we had the evidence for a long time, when nurture was working successfully in places such as Ballysally Primary School, Coleraine, and Holy Family Primary and Nursery School, Londonderry? It took the Department a long time to recognise its value. Now, we have this report and a Minister who is being proactive on the issue.

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

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I take his point that evidence does not lead to quick change. That is the point I would make about early years and why, at every opportunity, I keep making the point and the argument, as Mr Attwood just did, that this is the single most important intervention that we can make.

Whilst we have that evidence and whilst the Minister has, seemingly, agreed to take into account the wider aspects of this debate, we have not seen that paradigm shift towards early

years funding. I appreciate that you cannot simply say that, overnight, you are going to stop funding these services for children and young people in later life because the evidence is that the benefit is earlier. It has to be a managed transition. However, every time we call for additional funding or receive additional funding — recently, £18 million was proposed for PE to tackle obesity — we have to take those opportunities to invest in nought to six, follow the evidence and make those impacts.

So, in the spirit of the debate, I will not push my amendment to a Division. I appreciate the SDLP magnanimously proposing to support it but we have not had a divisive debate and we should not have a divisive outcome. I am happy, as was suggested, to bring forward a motion specifically on early years. I ask simply that I be empowered by the Business Committee to do so or that another party brings it forward in conjunction with the Green Party. We should take consensus when we have it and build on it. Even Mr Allister my honourable colleague gave credit to the Government. When we reach that level of consensus, we should bank it.

4.45 pm

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Members who participated in the debate. It has been a momentous occasion for the House in the level of agreement. I want to start by commending the Minister for all his work on and commitment to nurture units and for the commitment that he gave throughout his speech on their sustainability and on looking at new ways of doing this. I trust that, when I ask him for one in Upper Bann, he will be so obliging.

It has been a good debate. We have been very clearly educated about nurture units. I have only entered the Assembly and taken up my role on the Education Committee, and I have not had the privilege of visiting a nurture unit; I will make a point of doing that. There is no question that nurture units help to develop children and young people who avail themselves of them. Quite often, these young people, as we heard, are some of the most vulnerable in society —

Mr Humphrey: I thank my colleague from Upper Bann for giving way. The Member is quite right. I represent North Belfast, and Edenbrooke Primary School in the greater Shankill is one of the schools that is fortunate enough to have a nurture unit. As a governor there, I have seen the difference that that has made to the young people. I have heard from

the teachers, the parents and, in particular, the principal about the immense effect that has had on those young people. It also ripples out into the classroom and the community.

Ms Lockhart: I thank the Member for his contribution; maybe that is the one that I will visit, if you are willing to be accommodating.

From my perspective, it is important that these children and young people experience this in a safe environment, and I believe that there is probably nowhere safer than a school setting. Whilst things may be falling apart around them in their life, as children and as individuals, it is important that there is some structure in the school setting.

There has been reference to the Queen's University report, and I will quote the director of the centre for evidence and innovation, Paul Connolly:

"research provides clear evidence of the benefits of nurture groups for children who face challenges in their early years in education. We found that nurture groups led to significant improvements in social, emotional and behavioral outcomes".

There was mention of the Marjorie Boxall award for nurture provision, and Rathcoole was, I think, the latest unit to receive that award. *[Interruption.]* Apologies — it was Harryville; we commend them.

I will move to Members' contributions. Lord Morrow led on this and very eloquently outlined the DUP's position. He has always championed the need to ensure that children who are on the margins of society have adequate provision. He said that a stitch in time saves public funds and gives hope for families, and I think that the message that has been woven throughout today's debate is that early intervention and the money spent on nurture units will have a positive effect in the future. He noted that there was funding from a variety of sources and that there is no doubt that the Minister is committed to trying to mainstream that and to move it forward from within the education budget so that each nurture unit has some security in its long-term provision.

Steven Agnew moved amendment No 1 and commended Peter Martin, one of my colleagues, who has done a lot of work on this.

You quite rightly said it was important to get the foundations right. You noted the reality that there are limited resources. We acknowledge

that. I think it has to be said that there is not a bottomless pit of money, but, again, there has been a commitment. I also note that you quoted the £1/£9 scenario, and, again, that demonstrates that, if we invest early, it will have a positive impact.

I note that Colin McGrath, moving the second amendment, said that he welcomed the Queen's University report. I know that, with his background, he is very interested in the long-term impact of nurture units on youth provision. He said he wants to see them widened, as well as a sustainable funding model, which was the train of thought of most people throughout the House.

In her comments, Jennifer McCann talked about the units having a very similar environment to the home. Again, there was widespread support for the fact that these children are getting very basic skills. Fortunately, quite a few of us in the House probably never experienced that situation because we were brought up in a relatively stable environment. I think that was well noted. She also noted the need to make sure that places are provided to families who have got caught in the trap of deprivation. That point has been well made.

Sandra Overend noted that, throughout the UK, there are quite a number of nurture units and said that there was maybe something we could learn from them and share. You also noted — through the Chair — that early intervention is important and that social, emotional and behavioural skills are developed in nurture units. You noted that it cost £70,000 per school and were keen to see some further research. You said you would support amendment No 2 and vote against amendment No 1.

Chris Dickson said there was a 57% reduction in behavioural problems as a result of nurture units. He said that — Chris Lyttle: apologies. This is my first time giving a winding-up speech in a debate, so please bear with me. One in five showed improvements having been in a nurture unit, which, I think, is a good statistic to quote. The costs for families and social services etc can be addressed and mitigated by nurture units and can actually be reduced. You also noted the academic achievements and said that further research is needed into those. The Minister broadly agreed that he would look at that situation.

My colleague Phillip Logan said there are clear indicators within the report that intervention works and that there is a wider school impact. When schools as a whole benefit from these

nurture groups, they say it has a ripple effect — like a stone in a pond — on other classes. He commended the Minister for his commitment to further investment. He said it was likely to pay for itself in two years, which, again, demonstrates its viability and sustainability.

Barry McElduff spoke as Chair of the Education Committee. He said that nurture sits well with other early interventions. I think that is very true; I do not think nurture is a silver bullet to deal with all the problems that can occur in a young person's life, but I believe it has its place and is very cost-effective.

Rosemary Barton outlined how she wants to see the best start in life for children. She wants nurture groups to be rolled out in all areas throughout the country, in all schools, and to look towards post-primary. I certainly take Mrs Barton's comments on board, but we have to look at the sustainability and viability of it. I think that the Minister made the point with regard to the amount of funding that it would take to have it in every school.

Catherine Seeley, in her contribution to the debate, said that it did help in the development of positive relationships.

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

Ms Lockhart: Yes. Obviously, Sinn Féin agreed to it. I think that it would be remiss of me not to mention that our colleague Jim Allister agreed with the Government. We certainly welcome that. It is a historic move.

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

Ms Lockhart: Thank you very much.

Mr Allister: Do not get carried away.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I feel the hand of history. *[Laughter.]* Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2.

Mr Agnew: I seek to withdraw amendment No 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): The Member has sought leave to withdraw the amendment standing in his name. If there are no objections, the amendment will be withdrawn.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the report by the Centre for Evidence and Social Innovation at Queen's University Belfast, entitled 'The Impact and Cost Effectiveness of Nurture Groups in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland'; welcomes the commitment of the Minister of Education to continuing to fund the 32 nurture units across Northern Ireland; and, as recommended in the report by Queen's University, calls on the Minister of Education to ensure that a sustainable funding model is put in place for the longer-term viability of nurture group provision, to plan the further expansion of nurture provision in each primary school sector targeted in the areas of greatest need, to develop appropriate training for staff and to conduct research into models for the delivery of nurture provision.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Kennedy): I ask the House to take its ease while we make changes.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

Cookstown Social Security Office: Proposed Closure

Mr Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Ms Linda Dillon to raise the matter of the proposed closure of Cookstown social security office. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes.

Ms Dillon: I appreciate the opportunity to bring this Adjournment debate forward on what is an extremely important issue for my constituents and me. It first came to my attention when some of the staff who work in the offices were notified by a leaked document that there was a proposed closure of these offices. We then received emails from the Department.

Even the way in which it initially came out was totally wrong for the staff and everybody involved. I welcome some of those people; they are in the Gallery today. There are representatives of the staff here. I thank those who came up here today to outline the issues. They were out at the front of Parliament Buildings earlier; I think that they met quite a few MLAs to highlight the issues. The fact that they made the effort to come up here and took the time out of work to do that shows their concern.

5.00 pm

There are a number of issues that I will address with regard to the proposed closures. I am glad to see that the Minister is here to listen to us. I know that he has met Mid Ulster District Council and a number of MLAs already on the issue. The first concerns the failures in the consultation document. It fails to recognise the working poor and the low-wage employment common across the area. There is a wild underestimation of journey times and costs, which have a serious negative impact on claimants. The premises analysis uses wholly unrealistic estimated capital costs and, therefore, is not reflective of cost-effectiveness. The cost-effectiveness measures use only jobseekers' allowance (JSA) claimants; they ignore the much greater number of other clients, who would better reflect the office usage. Equality screening was totally inadequate; it failed to note the differential impacts on women, older people, carers, people with disabilities and migrant communities. The rural proofing was completed only on 4 November, which was eight weeks into the consultation. I do not know how the Minister thought that that would instil any confidence in the largely rural constituency of Mid Ulster.

Due to the nature of the constituency, access is hindered by poor public transport. Almost 16% of households have no access to personal transport. Let us face it: the reality is that they are most likely to be the people who need access to social security offices. I would be interested to know whether any future-proofing has been done on the proposed closures, given that the regional development strategy 2035 defines Cookstown as a main hub with a growing population and a higher proportion of nought-to-15-year-olds than the rest of the North.

The Minister talks about the use of telephony and broadband. As a representative of the area, I assure you that the biggest issue that I am challenged about — it is raised with me

regularly — is poor broadband and mobile phone infrastructure in the constituency. Whilst I will continue to lobby to have those issues addressed, I do not believe that, in the current circumstances and where we are likely to sit over the next number of years, that is a valid proposal.

I am aware that the unions have raised consistently with the Minister their concerns around the lack of engagement with them in relation to the proposed closures in advance of any proposals. Sinn Féin opposes strongly the Tory cuts and welfare reform. Unfortunately, we are dealing with a Tory Government who, quite frankly, are not concerned about their own constituents, never mind the people over here. We have seen the result of how they have decided to implement welfare reform. Minister, you have an opportunity to do things differently and ensure that our most vulnerable citizens, particularly those with mental ill health and disabilities, have access to front-line services. I assure you that many people will not be able to access the service if the office in Cookstown is closed. People with mental health problems often have difficulty asking for help. What will we do when those people start falling through the cracks? Are they just going to be collateral damage?

My background is in working in the Sinn Féin advice centre in Coalisland and dealing with welfare and all those issues with very vulnerable people in our society. They are the people who do not ask for help and do not know where to go for help. I would be very concerned for those people in a situation where there is no front-line service. They will fall through the cracks. It is already happening. I have met Citizens Advice on numerous occasions about the difficulties that it was having with people. There have been occasions when staff have had to go out to people's homes — I have been in this situation — and deal with people at the very brink, who will possibly go that step further and take their own life. We know that some people across the water have already taken their own life. I am quite sure that it has happened and will continue to happen here. We need to protect those people. Cost-effectiveness has to be looked at in the round. What cost are we prepared to pay? Will that cost be to our health service? This is one Executive, and we need to look after every part of it. That is something that needs to be taken into consideration.

I am also concerned about what will happen if people are unable to attend appointments through no fault of their own but because of the poor transport infrastructure and have sanctions

placed on them as a result that could mean families being left without money for food or household necessities. I know that all of that needs to be addressed and is not necessarily your responsibility, but the fact is that it is what it is, and we have to live in the circumstances that we live in. You might say that there are appeals processes and measures to negate, but we have seen with previous measures that have been taken that that does not always work. People will, as I have already said, fall through the cracks, and I have dealt with numerous such cases. Most often, it tends to be those with mental ill health or people with mild to medium learning difficulties who fall into that situation.

The Minister may talk about the ring-fenced money for advice services. However, that money is for the entire North, not just for Cookstown or even Mid Ulster. Let us face it: by the time it goes around, there will not be much left to negate any impact of office closures in Cookstown, Ballynahinch or Newcastle. The reality is that, with the changes to welfare, there will be a greater need than ever to protect our vulnerable constituents. The first step is to retain our front-line services across the North. I am not asking to protect just those three offices: we need all the offices that we have across the North.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dillon: Yes.

Ms S Bradley: Vulnerable service users will be affected, but does the Member agree that rural dwellers will be among the most vulnerable, as they will have difficulty accessing services, should the offices be closed?

Ms Dillon: Absolutely, and I will address that. You are 100% right. I raised that as the Chair of the AERA Committee. I asked for the Minister to be written to and, in turn, for her to have a conversation with her Executive and party colleague, because I felt that that was something that had been absolutely ignored. For that reason, I was extremely concerned.

The staff in the offices are predominantly at a lower grade, female and with caring responsibilities. As such, they will be severely negatively impacted on by any closure, resulting in them having to travel further to work and at a greater cost. Again, I do not see any evidence that the Department has given this any great degree of consideration.

There has been much work carried out, as I have already outlined, by Mid Ulster District Council to try to work with the Department to find solutions to ensure that the service can be retained in Cookstown. This is a very positive move: local government is wanting to work with central government to deliver for communities. That is community planning in practice, but it will work only if the Minister approaches it with an open mind and sees the need to protect these front-line services and, as has just been outlined, our rural dwellers. One of the main concerns raised by the council and by numerous people in public meetings was the fact that Mid Ulster is a largely rural constituency yet the figures that were used were those within a mile of Cookstown town centre. Ardboe, Moortown, Killen, Aughamullan and all these other places are nowhere near Cookstown centre.

I ask the Minister to rural-proof any planned closures honestly and genuinely. When you look at it, you will see that they cannot be rural-proofed. If you close the offices, people in my constituency will not be able to access the service. Unless you have other proposals that we have not yet seen, there is nothing that will address that. I am seriously concerned about the impact that this will have. As I have already outlined, we are not just talking about people on jobseeker's allowance. Those are the figures that were used in the consultation for how many people use the service. We are talking about people on tax credits. We are moving to universal credit, and apparently that is the reason that we are looking at changing these services. Universal credit will mean that more people will need to visit the office, not fewer. That is why we need to retain an office in Cookstown and not just in Cookstown — Ballynahinch and Newcastle fall into the same category. They have all the same challenges, in that they are rural areas and have vulnerable constituents.

I ask the Minister to listen to what is being said. I know that you have already met numerous MLAs, that you met the council, and that a lot of these issues have already been outlined. You have met NIPSA and have heard their arguments, and their arguments are well thought through; they have all the statistics to show the negative impact that this has already had across the water. I do not want to see our people suffering the same fate. It was said outside the Building today that it will be a sad indictment on us as a government if we have a food bank in a town and no social security office.

Mr Speaker: Members, there is a very full speaking list. Therefore, I propose that constituency Members will each have up to four minutes to speak and all other Members who wish to speak will have three minutes.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Member for bringing the debate to the House. Following representation by staff and constituents in August about the possible closure of Cookstown and Magherafelt social security offices and jobcentres, I met the Minister for Communities on 6 September to discuss the long-term future of services being provided across Mid Ulster. At that meeting, the Minister reassured me that the long-term future of Magherafelt jobs and benefits office would be secure and that it would have an important role in the new universal credit service. While I welcomed this news, I was very mindful of the role of Cookstown social security office and jobcentre. The Minister assured me that a review, which closes today, would be carried out by his Department and that no member of staff would be made redundant and that those staff who would have to move would be offered suitable posts in other parts of the Department. Since that meeting, I have visited the Cookstown offices and met and listened again to the concerns of staff regarding possible closure.

Cookstown, as we all know, and as the last Member said, serves a large rural area. People will be forced to travel to Dungannon and Magherafelt with their concerns about their benefits. There will be no facility for face-to-face interviews for vulnerable groups in this area; there will be no one to help with form-filling advice and answers to queries, especially with ongoing changes from welfare reform. Many clients or customers from Cookstown and the surrounding area do not have access to the Internet or, indeed, good Internet coverage. Cookstown social security office may be only 11 miles from Cookstown and 10 from Magherafelt, but recent census figures show that just over 15% of households in Cookstown have no transport. That means that many of those accessing the services of this office — indeed, need them — will need to depend on public transport. Unfortunately, being a rural constituency, public transport can be sparse and result in two or three bus journeys either way.

Centralising services will dramatically reduce the number of staff working locally, who, in future, will only be capable of providing advice to claimants on a limited number of payments. There has been widespread concern about the Social Security Agency proposals to move staff

out of local offices. It is important that local offices are retained to protect jobs, meet the needs of customers and ensure that the economy does not suffer another blow as a result of public-sector jobs being transferred out of the town. We are living in tough times when local businesses are struggling for custom, and the proposal to move staff from local offices will, without a doubt, have a major negative impact on local trade.

While I recognise the need to ensure an effective, responsive and resilient customer service to meet the needs of claimants following the introduction of universal credit, I ask the Minister to consider that the current social security office provides a vital service for around 38,000 people in the whole Cookstown catchment area. It is not just jobseeker's allowance claimants who use the office in Cookstown; many access the service seeking advice and support on pension credit and employment support.

Although it is proposed that some services will be available digitally, as we have previously discussed, unfortunately, the broadband network in Mid Ulster is somewhat weak. There is a fear that people will receive higher sanctions on their benefits due to the difficulties that they will face trying to participate in face-to-face meetings with advisers. Staff are concerned that there may be an increased workload with the introduction of universal credit and that a reduction in local services will have a negative effect on the whole community of Cookstown. There is increasing concern that, if they have to move to alternative offices, they will incur additional travel and childminding costs, meaning that their work-life balance will be greatly affected and may result in them having no option but to seek alternative employment.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

5.15 pm

Mr K Buchanan: I welcome the fact that the Minister is in the Chamber today and place on record that he had an open-door policy to meet public representatives, including MLAs and Mid Ulster councillors, to listen to the concerns of the staff. It would be a great comfort to local people if the Minister would look at innovative ways to maintain local access in the Cookstown area to the services provided.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for bringing this important Adjournment debate forward. I

welcome the opportunity to participate and I am pleased that the Minister is present to respond to the debate. I am also grateful to him for meeting me a few weeks ago on the matter and I look forward to further engagement.

I am sure that, by now, the Minister appreciates the strength of feeling about these proposals in Cookstown and the surrounding areas. He can rest assured that we will continue to lobby him on this particular issue. The proposed closure of the social security office and the jobcentre in Cookstown has raised many concerns for claimants and employees. At the outset, it is clear that the implementation of the proposals will have a detrimental effect on service users and staff. It will mean that constituents will have to travel much further on a regular basis to access social security services.

When I asked the Minister, in a recent Question Time, to assure me that claimants from Cookstown and the surrounding rural area will not be out of pocket by travelling to Magherafelt or somewhere else to sign on, he was, unfortunately, unable to give me a satisfactory answer. Indeed, he admitted that changes such as those proposed here can create turbulence and cause a lot of discomfort for some individuals who have to go through them, and that must give great cause for concern.

I and other Members were contacted by a number of members of staff from the offices in Cookstown, as well as trade union representatives, expressing legitimate concerns about the potential reduction in services resulting from the closure of these offices and the subsequent redundancies or redeployment of staff away from their local area. It is crucial that the difficulties and stress that the closures will cause are not brushed under the carpet and that the voices of employees and service users are listened to and fully considered throughout the consultation process.

We all know that the roll-out of welfare reform, which as Members will remember was rushed through by the DUP and Sinn Féin without the chance for proper scrutiny, will bring significant change in how benefits are delivered. A part of that process is a move towards claimants using telephony and digital services. However, many service users, such as the elderly, the disabled, those without transport to Magherafelt or Dungannon and those not able to access the Internet, will continue to require face-to-face services and will appreciate being able to discuss their needs in person or with an adviser.

In that regard, and notwithstanding reduced budgets, I urge the Minister to consider proposals for the continuation of face-to-face advice for claimants in Cookstown. Proposals have been put forward to allow this, and I acknowledge and commend the work of Mid Ulster District Council to that end. Suggestions have been made for the social security office and the jobcentre to merge in one building or for a skeleton service to be run from the council offices. These scaled-down options would make financial savings on the one hand while meeting the needs of the most vulnerable service users on the other, and they should be given careful and serious consideration.

I was very disappointed to learn that these proposals had not been rural proofed before they were brought forward and that a report was belatedly commissioned to be conducted by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The impact on rural areas in Mid Ulster from these closures should have been assessed long before the proposal was even brought forward.

If the Minister decides to push ahead with closing the facilities, it is imperative that he considers accommodating adjustments such as the proposals for a scaled-down service in the town, IT training for service users and for employees to be relocated to the nearest social security offices.

I am also concerned about the way in which the plans were communicated to staff. As the proposer mentioned, MLAs were informed that the information was leaked through —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Mrs Overend: I also raise the Minister's announcement in mid-September of 280 public-sector jobs to help deal with credit and child maintenance payments in GB. I hope he can explain how that announcement could be made at that time, yet he is looking at how to take jobs away from Cookstown.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for bringing the Adjournment debate today. While I do not particularly welcome the occasion of it being before us, inevitably it is here — the proposal that we have to close the social security office and the jobs and benefits office.

I have represented the area since 1993 as a councillor and, latterly, as an MLA in the last number of years. I have had dealings with staff in the local offices and know that local

accessibility has proven itself and meant a lot to so many people who find themselves in really difficult circumstances. Two cases come to mind. The first is when a family would have been made homeless but for an officer's intervention and diligence, dedication to the task and commitment to serving the community. In another case, a young single parent would have had no money to heat her house in the middle of a harsh winter. I remember vividly the two members of staff who dealt with those cases and went beyond the call of duty in their dedication. Access to that service was crucial and pivotal in helping those people in their difficult circumstances.

Cookstown social security office, as was mentioned, covers an area with a population of 38,000, including a large migrant community. At the time of the 2011 census, 3.4% of the population did not have English as their first language. Public transport provision is poor, and around 16% of households do not have access to personal transport, despite the largely rural location. There are pockets of significant deprivation, with 27% of the population considered to be income-deprived, while over 3,000 are rated as employment-deprived. Additionally, 21% of people have had long-term health problems or disability. That gives Members some idea of the background to the issue and why the proposed closure of Cookstown social security office and jobs and benefits office and the removal of those services from a local office is a matter of concern to me and others.

I move on to rural proofing, which was mentioned. No rural proofing was done on this. Five phone calls were made, and that qualifies as rural proofing in a big, scattered area that is densely populated, with the associated plethora of problems among the population. As for the relevance by way of nods to the Rural Needs Act — I really do not know. Apparently, the rural-proofing document, such as it is, has been kept under review during the consultation period. I really think that that needs to be looked at.

We have talked about people who are vulnerable and people who have difficulties, disabilities etc. I have looked at the equality impact screening, and it is based on this: "No figures or evidence are available to indicate this, so it must not exist". There is no evidence because the Department does not have any evidence. I have put down Assembly questions about that on issues such as gender, disability and nationality, given the migrant population that I referred to, but it does not have any stats on the usage of those offices so it cannot come

to a conclusion about whether an equality impact assessment is viable or not. It does not have the evidence, so the screening is immaterial. This will cause hardship for many unemployed and low-waged residents.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr McGlone: As we face into universal credit and given the difficulties with it in GB, I call on the Minister to reverse any proposed decision to close the offices.

Mr Milne: I thank my colleague Linda Dillon for securing the Adjournment debate. It affords us the opportunity to speak about the proposal that is out to consultation, which includes the closure of Cookstown social security office and jobcentre. As many of the issues have been discussed, I will be brief here tonight. I thank and welcome the staff, the unions and the representatives of Mid Ulster District Council who are present in the Public Gallery for the debate and those who were part of the delegation that we met earlier. I commend them for their commitment and efforts to retain this valuable front-line service.

Sinn Féin, as you heard, has conducted a number of meetings with the Minister for Communities, NIPSA and staff members about the issue, given the impact not only on Magherafelt, Cookstown and Dungannon but right across the North. We are all aware that we are entering a period of significant change in the welfare system, and the reorganisation that runs alongside that has created a lot of uncertainty and concern for all social security staff. It is most keenly felt in areas facing potential closure. We are also familiar with the response coming from the Department regarding efficiencies and the building restrictions associated with Cookstown. While we acknowledge those points, they need to be balanced with the negative impact such a move would have for staff and claimants. In particular, the Minister needs to take account of the rural nature of the constituency.

The closure of the local offices will not only remove an essential service from the town but will reduce the already limited number of public-sector jobs in the mid-Ulster area. For many years, people from Mid Ulster have had to travel considerable distances to take up posts in the public sector and absorb the associated travel costs and impact on family life. Transfers have been long-awaited and hard-fought for, so it is disappointing to see that rural areas are to be at the forefront of the Minister's proposals.

Despite the Department's indications that the proposals would have no differential impact on any section 75 categories, it is a fact that just over 88% of the staff who will be affected are women.

The closure will also create challenges for claimants. People already suffering financially will be forced to travel further to seek welfare advice, and those without personal transport will struggle to adhere to appointment times. I have no doubt that the move towards a telephone and digital service will not be without its problems, particularly given the limited access to broadband and the patchy mobile signal that is experienced in many areas of Mid Ulster. I suggest that the requirement for face-to-face contact is set to increase rather than decrease as the changes come into effect. I call on the Minister to ensure that that need is met.

I conclude by urging the Minister to listen to the concerns raised about the proposal and seek an alternative solution that would see the retention of the jobs and benefits service. I would also say to the Minister that this is not just a lobby from individuals; it is coming from Mid Ulster District Council, which I imagine is one of the biggest types of lobbyist the Minister will ever face.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Harold McKee, I advise you that, as you are an MLA from outside the Mid Ulster constituency, you have been allocated three minutes.

Mr McKee: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I concur with the frustration of all those who use the Cookstown social security office and the staff who will most likely have to travel to other offices to seek work. We have a similar issue in Newcastle and Ballynahinch, where there is a recommendation to close the social security offices and jobs and benefits offices.

This is much bigger than a cost-cutting exercise; it will have a knock-on effect on the economies of Cookstown, Ballynahinch and Newcastle. Most importantly, the process of encouraging claimants to go online will give no reason for older or younger people to leave their home. That can often lead to those who look forward to a reason to go into their town or village to have a face-to-face conversation, shop or socialise becoming less able, housebound or even depressed. With many of our rural areas having residents unable to receive broadband, those people must make their way to a social security office and will have no other means to do that but by hiring a taxi to

go a greater distance. That will, in turn, take a fair chunk out of their payments.

It is disappointing that, at the end of the consultation period, the Minister has said, even today, that he is minded to close the three offices. I urge him to give this essential service, which is dear to many, a fair hearing and to listen to the concerns.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas le Linda Dillon. I thank Linda Dillon for bringing the matter to the Assembly. It is good to see colleagues from Mid Ulster and South Down here doing a joint lobby to fight for essential services. It is also good to see representatives from every party, and I hope the Minister notes there is cross-party support, including his party. I have no doubt that Jim Wells would be here, only for his personal circumstances, to defend Newcastle and Ballynahinch.

I join the representatives who have spoken about the difficulties that closures will create for people in rural areas, the adverse impact they will have on women and the fact that the bus and transport system is not the best.

It could end up costing a week's worth of fuel if claimants have to pay for travel out of their own pockets. The cost of public transport from one town to another will eat up a significant amount of a person's benefit. Access to crisis loans will be even harder for those in need, due to the distance and cost involved. People will have to travel to Kilkeel or Downpatrick to address any concerns that they have about any of their benefits.

5.30 pm

The other factor that needs to be taken into account — I am lobbied about it all the time — is the poor broadband coverage and speed in South Down. This also comes into play. Online solutions will not work for many people. Indeed, I put two questions for written answer to the Minister — AQW 6294/16-21 and AQW 6293/16-21 — and I have to say that I was very disappointed with the incomplete response. Some questions that I asked were not even responded to; they were glossed over. I ask the Minister to have another look at the questions and ask his officials to give a more complete response on this occasion.

The staff in the offices earmarked for closure are also very concerned, and I note that they have joined us at Stormont today. They will also be forced to travel further distances. We had assurances that none of these offices were

going to be closed, and now we are a wet week into the new mandate, and we have leaked memos about potential closures. I know —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude her remarks.

Ms Ruane: — that all my colleagues in South Down will support our colleagues in Cookstown, and we will fight this together.

Mr McGrath: I wholeheartedly support the calls today to stop any potential closure of jobs and benefits offices across the North from going ahead. Given that many hundreds of people will still be required to present themselves to an office, I am deeply concerned that moving the services from the Cookstown office will have an unfair impact on those who live in rural areas, similar to the impact of closures in Ballynahinch, which is near to my constituency, and Newcastle, which is in my constituency.

Many people who live in places such as Lissan, Ardboe and Kildress and other rural areas will now face lengthy journeys, often involving multiple changes, to get to their new offices, and will spend considerable time travelling there and back — time that they could spend applying for jobs. It astounds me that moving to an IT-based system can be suggested as a positive solution to proposed closures when an equality impact assessment is yet to be carried out. It is clear that proper thought has not gone into this so-called solution. Of course, we have to consider the massive cost of the service, which will be passed on to the claimant. It assumes that the benefit recipients can afford to buy computers and pay for broadband. Can the Minister confirm that the cost of broadband and purchasing computers will be reflected in an increase to the amount of money that benefit recipients will get?

Rural disparity is surfacing again, with broadband provision in rural areas being significantly weaker than in cities. I question whether we have evidence to prove that weaker broadband will be able to facilitate a new IT-based system. The use of IT systems in an independent manner assumes that everyone has capable literacy standards. As this is not the case, those who are unable to use services will have to travel to centres to get assistance. I believe that this is an outright act of discrimination against those who have lower literacy capacity.

It is unquestionable that the proposed closure of the Cookstown jobcentre and social security office will have a disproportionate impact on

women. Some 88.5% of staff in the Cookstown offices are women. It is clear that consideration is not being given to the locality of workplace for existing staff and the fact that many have chosen to work in their local jobs and benefits office as it is conveniently located to ensure that they can remain as carers for elderly family members or for children.

Mr Speaker, you will notice that I have a lot of concerns about the proposed changes and that the word that keeps cropping up is "equality". I am deeply concerned that a full and robust equality impact assessment has not been undertaken and urge that it be completed. If we do not assess, we are left to guess, and that is not the basis for any decisions. I call on the Minister and the Executive to reverse the decision.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr McGrath: There is more than one party in the Executive, and there is more than one party that can help to make the decision appropriate.

Mr McElduff: Maybe on one discordant note, it is a pity that the previous Member's party did not take its place in the Executive and accept responsibility.

I will now move to a more unanimous and harmonious mode. I commend Linda Dillon for proposing this debate. Living in mid-Tyrone, as I do, I am very familiar with the Cookstown situation and with the rural communities that Linda outlined and which are severely disadvantaged by having poor broadband access. I also commend the MP for Mid Ulster, Francie Molloy, for his proactive role in this campaign and for being in attendance this evening. I ask that the Minister makes this decision his own because, when I met the Minister some months ago in relation to issues relevant to this matter pertaining to the Omagh area, I got the impression that he, being new in office, may not have had time to make this his own decision. It was a developing and evolving situation that he may have inherited, and I would like the Minister to put his own stamp on the decision.

The reasons of rurality, rural proofing and broadband have been outlined. I want to put on record that there is a proposal to relocate a number of Social Security Agency posts away from Omagh, and this is wholly unnecessary because, in the Omagh office, there has been significant investment in telephony systems, and it has a very valuable workforce. I

understand that the Minister is going to meet Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in early December to discuss this. There is no proposal to close the Omagh Social Security Office but there is one to relocate a number of posts, and I am saying about it and the Cookstown office that we should be moving in the direction of decentralisation, not centralisation. That should be a key feature of our Programme for Government when it is concluded.

In solidarity with the people in the Cookstown district and in Newcastle and elsewhere, I just wanted to make my position known and to call for the retention of a number posts in Omagh. The current plan is that they shall be relocated. When you meet those staff, you see that they are not at an age when travelling to their work will come easy to them. I ask for a little bit of compassion and for the Minister to make this his own decision —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr McElduff: — not just something that has been passed to him by senior civil servants.

Mr Smith: I thank Linda Dillon for bringing this important issue to the House. I might be an interloper from Strangford, given that this is an issue affecting Cookstown, but, as the proposer said in her opening comments, whilst this is focused on Cookstown, there are two other offices involved: Ballynahinch, in my constituency, and Newcastle. The three of them have been grouped together and looked at as a package. Similar issues have been consulted on, and they face the same problems.

Members have talked about the two major issues, the primary one being the impact on claimants. Travel time is the key issue for people in rural areas. Members talked travelling the 10 or 11 miles from Cookstown to Magherafelt or Dungannon, and, in my constituency, with the example of Ballynahinch, we are talking about people travelling to Newtownbreda or Lisburn. By the time that people, first, incur the costs of getting there and, secondly, travel to and fro, with a public transport timetable that does not facilitate transport particularly well, the reality is that people who are going to claim JSA are probably technically not available for work that day because of the time and effort that they have of getting to and from the place of signing on. I think that the Minister should take that on board. That is before you consider the more vulnerable, such as those who have young

children, those who are disabled and service users who are older. Those people will find this a much more difficult proposition.

The other impact, of course, is on the towns themselves. The consultation certainly focuses on that, but it talks about the lack of footfall if staff go.

In Ballynahinch, for example, there are 13 or 14 staff but 13,000 or 14,000 service users. I appreciate that that may be only a secondary issue from the Minister's perspective, but, if you take the offices out of these towns, it will have a massive impact on trading conditions. That needs to be taken on board.

The key issues in the consultation were value for money and the need for investment. From a value-for-money perspective, the focus in Ballynahinch in my constituency was on running costs for staff, when, in reality, they should look at the running costs for the service users, which is a much better comparison. On the issue of investment, the comparison in the consultation for Ballynahinch was for a £2.2 million new build, when, in reality, a £700,000 refurbishment of the existing building would have sufficed. There was more —

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Smith: — to look at in the consultation. I agree with my colleague Sandra Overend and urge the Minister to be creative in order to maintain face-to-face services in the towns affected.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for bringing the topic to the House today. We are talking, of course, about the closure of the Cookstown centre, but we cannot forget Ballynahinch and Newcastle, which, as has been mentioned, will be affected by the proposals.

People have a right to access these centres for advice and support; indeed, one of the roles of the Department for Communities is to get people back to work. I ask how that can be done when people are having their local jobcentre closed in their face. That is not to mention the effect that the closures will have on staff.

People whom I talk to are being told that the centres are not fit for purpose, but we know the story all too well here. Centres and facilities are run down and starved of investment, and then we are told that they cannot operate, are not fit for purpose and have to close. We have seen it

before, and no doubt we will see it again. It is also worth saying that this is a Department that is wasting £25 million paying private companies to implement a Steps 2 Success programme that is not very successful and is absolutely failing to find people permanent jobs. That is public money thrown down the drain. I pay tribute to NIPSA and everyone else involved in the campaign to save the centres. During the consultation period, there were public meetings in local areas. There were thousands of objection letters and thousands of petitions. If the consultation is to mean anything, those concerns have to be listened to. I hope that the Minister hears those voices today. He really, really should.

The closures present particular problems for people, including, as has been mentioned, those in rural areas. We live in an era in which most things are put online, but not everyone has access to the Internet or the skills to get online, along with the difficulties with broadband in rural areas that have been mentioned. If the centres are closed, people will be told to go online. What advice will the Minister give those people? Where will he tell them to go? In reality, closing the centres will send people to other towns to go to other jobcentres and social security centres. That is based on the assumption that people have access to a car or are able to drive. That is not always the case, especially for people who are unemployed and in receipt of benefits. Some people will not have access to a car or be able to afford £6 or £7 out of their £70 a week to pay for buses. The closures will further cut access for people living in rural areas, especially vulnerable people, and deny them information about the benefits that they are entitled to.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks.

Mr Carroll: Welfare reform has been mentioned. It is already coming in, with 21,000 sanctions already this year. I do not say it lightly, but the reality with welfare reform is that we will see cases like that of Daniel Blake across the region unless people get organised and fight back against it.

Mr Givan (The Minister for Communities): I thank Ms Dillon for tabling the Adjournment topic and for allowing Members an opportunity to speak on something that I know they feel passionately about. That has been reflected in the way in which they have wanted to engage with me on the issue. Hopefully they have found me willing to engage with them on it. Throughout the consultation process, the

requests have been coming in. From around the Chamber, I have met Mr Buchanan, Mrs Overend, Colin McGrath, Michelle O'Neill and Chris Hazzard. I have also met Jim Shannon and Councillor Billy Walker. I have met the delegation from Mid Ulster District Council, and I am meeting Francie Molloy next week.

I do not think that I have failed to meet any elected representative who has asked for a meeting with me to put the case. I have met Barry McElduff and Tom Buchanan when it was the only issue raised. Hopefully, that reassures Mr McElduff. I appreciate that he thinks that I am a new Minister. Let me assure the House that I will take the decision. This is not something where officials came to me and I signed a blank cheque to start a consultation process. People who know me know that I take decisions. There will be times when that is in agreement with how my civil servants advise me and others when it is contrary to their advice. However, I expect them at all times to give me impartial professional advice. They do that and will continue to do so. However, the decision on the consultation process that we are now going through will be mine. Consultation on the four offices closes today. The analysis will now take place, and, ultimately, I will take the decision and will have to stand over it.

Ms S Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Yes, I am happy to do so.

Ms S Bradley: I welcome that you embrace taking the decision and that you take ownership of it. Will you confirm, for clarity, whether your decision has to be presented to the Executive for completion?

Mr Givan: No, it clearly falls entirely within my responsibility; it is for my Department to take the decision. I will have to do that. Mr McKee and Mr McGrath spoke: one indicated that I had already given a view that I wanted this to happen, and Mr McGrath called for the decision to be reversed. Let me be very clear: there has been no decision. There has been a consultation process on proposals, but no decision has been taken on it. It will be for me to decide, once the analysis has been carried out and it comes to me to deal with. Then I will take the decision.

Let me go through in a little more detail the issues that we are looking at. I assure Members that I will consider all the responses received and that we will publish the results of the consultation process. That process has

given staff, public representatives and other stakeholders the opportunity to comment on and raise concerns regarding the closure of the offices. Just before I came in to the debate, I was advised that, so far, we are just shy of 400 responses to the consultation proposals. Mr Carroll of People Before Profit talked about thousands of representations; maybe they are coming or due to arrive, and quite a number came in today. At present, however, we sit just shy of 400 responses, although that figure may change. I have responded to a significant number of Assembly questions on the topic, and, as I outlined, I have met a number of MLAs and elected representatives. Apart from meeting them myself, senior officials in the Department directly met councillors and council officials.

In making the proposals, I recognise the importance of local access to services, and, therefore, the proposed closures are premised on the basis that there is a strong network of jobs and benefits offices that will continue to deliver front-line services. In recent years, the Department has made significant investment in modernising and improving access to our services through the jobs and benefits network and through the use of the telephony service. Indeed, 70% of social security benefit services are provided via telephone, and many will move online. I know that access to broadband is an issue that we have touched on, and Members have raised it both in meetings with me and in the debate. I recognise that it is an issue, and my Department is working with officials in the Department of Finance and in the Department for the Economy to deliver proposals to increase the coverage of the broadband network and to put in place local support to help the most vulnerable.

Further investment will be made in jobs and benefits offices to ensure that they are fit for purpose for the changes required for the introduction of universal credit and that they will support the use of digital service in the offices. Some Members have pointed to or certainly implied a view that rural areas are being disadvantaged in respect of how the services will be delivered. Welfare is changing, and therefore how we deliver services has to keep pace with that change so that we can deliver them to the people who require them. The three universal credit centres, for example, will be in Newry, Foyle and Belfast. This is not a Belfast-centric model that I want to develop; I am keen that it is pushed across the Province because it is a service that is required to be delivered across the Province. In respect of discretionary support, the two centres that we will use for that are in Antrim and Dungannon.

Those will be two major facilities, so this is not Belfast-centric.

I do not represent Belfast. As Minister, I am responsible for it, of course, but I am keen to make sure that services are delivered across the Province, and we are always looking at how we deliver on that. When you look at your jobs and benefits offices, you see that, as unemployment figures fluctuate, caseloads change in those offices and there is ongoing assessment of staffing requirements in those offices and changes take place as a result. That was the context of what I said to Sandra Overend. There is always change around how services are delivered, and that can create challenges and difficulties for those it impacts on. I recognise that, but we have to deliver the service as well as we can and as efficiently as we can, recognising that, in circumstances where people are vulnerable, we need to put measures in place to support them. I am committed to doing that.

I have asked my officials to look at other measures by which the most vulnerable claimants in isolated rural areas can be accommodated, for example by changing signing times, reviewing the need for postal signing or using the appointment-based service in alternative offices. In my meetings with MLAs and MPs, all argued that they wanted the offices to stay open, including mine. Mr Shannon told me, "I am mounting the barricades against you, Paul", and Keith Buchanan has made it clear he is opposed to what I am doing. I accept that elected representatives will voice the views of those they represent; I would not expect them to do anything less.

Members have also challenged me, including the representation from Mid Ulster District Council, that there needs to be a range of options looked at. Without prejudice to my decisions around this, it is important that we look at a range of options for what could be delivered. That will need to be explored.

Members have raised a range of issues. In respect of section 75 obligations, the Department is cognisant of its equality of opportunity responsibilities and ensures that all new or revised policies are scrutinised in accordance with the responsibilities detailed in the Department's equality scheme. The Department's initial assessment of the proposed office closures is that they do not directly discriminate against any of the section 75 groups and that appropriate measures can be put in place to mitigate any impacts, for example changes to signing times and the use

of online or telephony channels. I know Members have raised a number of —

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: I will, briefly, because I am finishing.

Ms Dillon: Does the Minister agree that continuous engagement with NIPSA and the other unions would be useful in any process like this?

Mr Givan: With five seconds to go —

Mr Speaker: I will allow the Member to answer the question.

Mr Givan: Let me assure Members: all the issues will be taken very seriously, and I am committed to taking my own view on all this on the basis of information that will be provided to me.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Adjourned at 5.54 pm.

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